



SLAYERS

8 *KING OF THE
PHANTOM CITY*

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1: Hellmaster Makes His Move

A hand as white as porcelain. Was it a woman's? I wasn't sure... but that's what I saw.

"Huh?" I breathed, momentarily disoriented.

My Ragna Blade had disarmed Chaos Dragon quite literally on his right side. It had also exhausted my magic and left me collapsed helplessly on the ground. It'd been all I could do to glare up at Gaav as he approached, ready to finish me off... But then he suddenly let out a deathly howl.

And now... I could see a slender arm extending out of Chaos Dragon's stomach.

"You..." His face was twisted with hatred as he looked back over his shoulder, his voice tinged with a mix of pain and rage. "Y-You... When did you..."

With those words, I finally understood what had happened. While Gaav was focused on me, someone else had approached him from behind and run him through—barehanded. Obviously, it wasn't any of us. Chaos Dragon could tank most of our spells completely unscathed. The only one capable of doing something like this was...

"I've been here the entire time... Though it seems only Xellos noticed," chimed a clear voice from behind Gaav.

It wasn't a woman. No, it sounded like... a child?! Where had they come from?

"It's been some time, Lina Inverse," said a small head, now poking out from behind the impaled demon.

"What...?" slipped a groan from my lips.

That familiar face, that black, slightly wavy hair... They belonged to a somewhat girlish-looking boy of eleven or twelve. Indeed, the very same one I'd met in Gyria City. This was the little boy who'd hinted to me about the plans of

Gaav's faction... and who I'd found lifeless after Xellos's rampage.

"I thought you were dead," I said, even as an inkling of his true identity began taking shape in my mind.

"Nobody ever actually said that I was. You just assumed so because Xellos told you my heart wasn't beating. And that wasn't a lie. After all, how could my heart be beating when I don't have one?" he said teasingly.

Aha... yeah, I guess that wasn't technically a lie. Xellos was awfully good at obfuscating the truth without outright mendacity.

"A ch-child?!" Amelia gasped tremblingly, perhaps still not comprehending the situation.

The boy smiled cheerfully back at her and said, "Yes, a child. The *appearance* of one, at least. I can take any form I like, but this one is rather convenient. Humans are such interesting creatures, so easy to manipulate... You always let your guard down in my presence like this."

"And that's why you never gave me your name..." I muttered.

"Oh, that's right. I still haven't introduced myself," he responded brazenly with a slight bow. "I," he said without a shred of humanity in his eyes, "am Fibrizo. But you can call me Hellmaster."

Amelia, Zel, and the dragon elder Milgazia all fell silent at this unceremonious introduction.

Gourry had gotten up at some point, and now stood with the Sword of Light in one hand as he looked my way questioningly. "Is he a famous person or something?" he asked.

Yeah, go figure he didn't remember me bringing up Fibrizo before... *Is it just impossible for you to remember multisyllabic names, dude?*

Hellmaster himself didn't seem too perturbed by Gourry's antics, however. He simply gave a light shrug and said, "Well, I am rather renowned in certain circles... though I'm

no person.”

“That much is clear,” Gourry replied, readying the Sword of Light once more—now for Fibrizo instead of Gaav.

“So... you and Xellos had me in the palm of your hand all this time,” I whispered through my teeth, my jaw clenched.

Fibrizo’s possum act in Gyria City had so fiercely incited me against Chaos Dragon that I’d readily agreed to do whatever Xellos said, even knowing I was being manipulated—even knowing it served Hellmaster, who now smiled at me slightly.



"It's true that you followed my plans to the letter. Gaav also showed up right on cue. But we can rehash that shortly... There's something I must take care of first," he said, then glanced back at Chaos Dragon, who was still speared on his arm.

Gaav had been silent and unmoving all this time, yet upon hearing this, he let out an angry howl and twisted around to strike at Hellmaster with his left hand. But...

Shrk! There came a quiet tearing sound, and Chaos Dragon's left arm went flying instead.

"Graaaaaaaagh!" Gaav shouted helplessly, falling to his knees in pain.

"Don't even bother, Gaav. You know I was always stronger than you, and you're stuck in this flawed form now... Surely you know that resisting me is futile." Hellmaster slowly looked down at Gaav, who remained speared on his arm. "I was thinking of killing you and purging the human element of your mixed blood... but it seems to be blended together in a most curious fashion. It's impressively confounding, a testament to Aqualord's binding abilities. Even killing you wouldn't allow me to restore you to your old self."

"Damn you! Damn you!" Gaav seethed, struggling as he glowered at Fibrizo. But the shadow of death already hung over his every word and movement.

"You'll never serve Lord Ruby-Eye again like this... which leaves us only one option."

"Damn you!"

"I must finish you for good," Fibrizo said, and the moment those words left his mouth...

Pop! Chaos Dragon's body was instantly rendered ash. It was... far too quick a death for the likes of Chaos Dragon Gaav. The white ash, looking almost like snow, danced higher on the wind and up into the sky above.

I see now... I finally understood why Chaos Dragon despised Hellmaster so. His power was just that overwhelming.

I'd only barely managed to scratch Chaos Dragon Gaav with the most desperate, reckless attack I had in my arsenal, and here Fibrizo had taken him out with a flick of his arm. Perhaps unable to comprehend the situation, or maybe out of instinctive fear, the others simply stared on in silence.

"All according to plan, huh?" I said, my eyes glued on Hellmaster from where I lay otherwise unmoving on the ground.

"More or less," Fibrizo replied in a tone exactly like a child bragging to his friends. "I sacrificed one of my underlings to pass a certain piece of information to Gaav's own—that I was plotting something involving Lina Inverse. That got the ball rolling. I then told Xellos, on loan from Greater Beast Zellas Metallium, to hang around and keep tabs on you."

"And after cluing me in on Chaos Dragon's movements and faking your own death... you waited for him to come out of hiding so you could run in with the backstab. Nice work if you can get it."

"I suppose. But there's a piece to the puzzle you're overlooking... It was I who guided you back to Xellos when you were lost in the Claire Bible's domain. Xellos is very useful in his way, but it would have taken him far too long to find you in that twisted place. No, no, don't bother to thank me..."

"What does all this mean?" Gourry asked with a knitted brow, still failing to grasp the situation.

I answered him, my eyes remaining locked on Hellmaster: "It means that, all along, I was Hellmaster's pawn for luring out the traitorous Chaos Dragon Gaav."

"That's part of it, yes," Hellmaster himself replied.

"Part of it?" I echoed. "You're saying there's more to it?"

"Oh, I thought you'd caught on by now... Or are you just feigning ignorance? Either way, my next move should be obvious..." Fibrizo turned his eyes from me to Gourry.

"Though I didn't expect to encounter Gorun Nova here. That forces me to choose *you*."

“Choose me? For what?” Gourry asked cluelessly.

“Bait,” Fibrizo said casually, then began sauntering toward him.

“Bait?!” he exclaimed, backing away with the Sword of Light at the ready.

“No need to be so frightened. No one’s really going to gobble you up. Simply come along and—”

Out of the blue, Amelia interrupted Hellmaster with an incantation: “Ra Tilt!”

I didn’t know when she’d started chanting the spell, but it now engulfed Fibrizo in a pillar of azure flame! And yet... when the flames died down, he stood there just the same, completely unfazed.

“Huh?!” came a shocked gasp from Amelia’s lips.

Fibrizo slowly turned his attention back to her. “You startled me there, dishing out a Ra Tilt like that... That might destroy a very low-tier demon, but not me,” he said with a child’s impish grin.

“No... No way,” she whispered, stunned motionless.

Her astonishment was completely understandable. Ra Tilt was the strongest shamanistic attack spell in the human playbook. It was a guaranteed kill against most opponents, including low-level demons. So for Hellmaster to smile so nonchalantly after taking one head-on... We were beholding the power of the highest order of demonkind.

“Now then...” Hellmaster calmly returned his gaze to Gourry. “I’m going to ask you to come with me... to the stage I’ve set.”

“And if I refuse?” Gourry asked, the Sword of Light briefly blazing brighter.

“You’re free to try, though you can’t actually stop me.”

There, Fibrizo snapped his fingers—and the brilliant blade in Gourry’s hands went out.

“What?!” he squealed in shock.

Did that mean... it was *Fibrizo* who’d extinguished the sword?!

“Humans shouldn’t be using that in the first place,” Hellmaster said.

He then snapped his fingers a second time. The instant he did, several dozen black tentacles burst forth from the Sword of Light and entangled Gourry!



“What?!” we cried in unison.

I’d never seen or heard any suggestion whatsoever that the Sword of Light’s hilt could produce something like that... I’d never even imagined it. And I was certain Gourry, the sword’s inheritor, hadn’t either.

“Wh-What?!” Gourry writhed desperately, but the tentacles showed no sign of letting go.

“The Sword of Light... what an arbitrary name you humans have given it. Its real name is Gorun Nova,” Fibrizo said quietly. “It’s one of Dark Star’s five weapons.”

“?!”

This sudden revelation had me at a loss for words. Xellos had mentioned that name when he sold me the talismans... Dark Star, dark lord of another world.

While we stood there dumbstruck, Fibrizo continued: “I don’t know who did it or how, but Gorun Nova was drawn into this world and transformed into something usable by humans. But even shaped like a weapon, it’s still a part of Dark Star—an extension of him. It’s like a demon itself, in other words. That means it’s far closer to me than you humans, thus I can easily bend it to my will instead.

“It’s meant to be wielded by a dark lord. That’s why, Lina Inverse, you didn’t exceed its capacity even when you channeled a Dragon Slave or *that other spell* through it. Granted, if you’d used the true form of *that spell*, I suspect not even Gorun Nova would have withstood it.”

You son of a... I glared at Hellmaster with all the vehemence I could muster.

“Have you caught on to my intentions now? Of course, I doubt you’d willingly oblige me if I asked, and you couldn’t do it right now anyway... So I’m going to take him with me. To my city, Sairaag.”

“Wait—” I started to shout, but before I could finish...

Crack! With an ear-splitting sound, Fibrizo and Gourry disappeared!

“Gourry!” I crawled to my feet, but a wave of vertigo

knocked me to my knees again.

Hellmaster had probably brought Gorun Nova into his resonance field and blinked through space, dragging Gourry with him. I assumed he was headed for Sairaag in the Lyzeille Empire, as he'd said. But what had he meant by "my city"?

The remaining four of us were left staring out into space.

"What... in the world just happened?" Amelia whispered, her question carried away on the wind unanswered.

I awoke from a dream I couldn't remember. It was frightening, maybe, or sad...

Driven by urges I didn't understand, I sat up in bed. My cheeks were wet. I must have been crying. I couldn't recall anything about what I'd been dreaming, but my tear-stained face told me it was a nightmare. At least, I didn't see how it could have been anything else.

Small beams of light streaked into my dim room through the plentiful cracks in the window shutters. *Morning, huh?*

After everything that had happened yesterday, me, Amelia, and Zel left Dragons' Peak behind and set ourselves up at this inn in a nearby village. I was so completely spent that I didn't even get dinner before I collapsed into bed. And then the next thing I knew, the sun was up.

I listlessly pulled myself out of bed and dragged myself down to the dining room on the first floor. There, I found Amelia and Zel already seated at a table like they were waiting for me.

Where's Gourry? I found myself unconsciously looking for him, and then it belatedly hit me... *Right, he isn't here...*

"Morning..." I said half-heartedly as I took a seat. I didn't have much of an appetite, so I ordered a meager two helpings of the breakfast special.

"You feeling okay?" Amelia asked with a faint look of concern.

I forced a smile and said, "Oh, yeah. Totally fine. Weird

dreams kept me up, is all.”

“Well, I hope that’s all it is...” she said with rare uncertainty, then fell quiet.

Eventually my breakfasts arrived, and I silently tore into them.

“So, what’s the plan?” Zelgadis asked once I started on my after-meal black tea.

“Master Zelgadis!” Amelia chastised.

He ignored her and continued, “We can’t just sit around sulking. Whatever we decide to do, it’s best to act quickly.”

“That’s... true,” I whispered after finishing my tea. I didn’t *feel* like I was depressed, but given how they were acting, I must have looked like it. I let out a tiny sigh and began rambling, “Thinking about it rationally... We’re up against Hellmaster Fibrizo. He effortlessly defeated Chaos Dragon Gaav and took a Ra Tilt without batting an eye... He’s a genuine monster. An entire series of Dragon Slaves probably wouldn’t be worse than a bee sting to him.

“In other words, even if I do go to Sairaag, not only will I fail to save Gourry, but I’ll be giving Hellmaster exactly what he wants... Besides, it’s not like he ever promised he’d return Gourry safe and sound if I comply. That means me going might actually put the big lug in even greater danger. He’s probably safer as a hostage if I don’t show up.

“The smartest move, then, might actually be for me to run the other way instead,” I said, then stopped. After some length of silence, I sighed with a self-effacing smile. “But still... despite his many, many faults, he *is* my guardian. I can’t just leave him in the lurch.”

“You mean...” Amelia started breathlessly.

“It’s off to Sairaag,” I replied with a nod.

“That’s my Lina!” she declared with a beaming smile.

“Even if you are a scheming, ill-tempered, loud-mouthed, unrepentant glutton, you can sometimes do the right thing!”

“Hang on, are you trying to pick a fight?”

“I don’t mean it maliciously! Or benevolently, either!”

Well... she was honest, I had to give her that.

"Now that it's decided, let's get out of here! Sairaag, here we come!" Amelia proclaimed with sudden gusto.

"W-Wait a minute!" I quickly interrupted her. "I'm going to Sairaag... but I'm going alone."

"What?" she replied, shocked by my words. "You mean... all by yourself?"

"Yeah, all by myself. I'm the one Hellmaster is after. There's no reason for all of us to go."

"That's true enough," Zelgadis whispered.

"Master Zelgadis!" Amelia exclaimed in a harsh voice.

But he responded evenly, "We're virtually powerless here, Amelia. Our spells won't even put a mark on Hellmaster. We'd be a drag on Lina, at best."

"That's true, but..." Amelia frowned when confronted with the inarguable truth.

"Still, we can't let her go alone. So we'll just need to keep our drag to a minimum," Zel said matter-of-factly, looking off in a random direction.

I had to wonder if he was embarrassed by his own cheesy line.

"Th-That's right! Of course!" Amelia shouted, her eyes sparkling again at Zelgadis's words of encouragement.

"Even if we can't beat him, we can't run away either! If we fight with courage in the name of justice, we'll always find a way to victory!"

Really? Life would be a lot easier if that were true, I whispered internally. Honestly speaking, I was highly doubtful that things like smarts, courage, and friendship stood much of a chance against a beast like Hellmaster. When he kidnapped Gourry, not even the golden dragon elder Milgazia had made a single move to interfere. Nevertheless, there was no way Zel and Amelia were just going to let me run off on my own.

"Now, there's one thing I want to get clear first," Zel said with a cool calm that rivaled Amelia's raging fire.

“Hellmaster’s objective.”

Yeah... figured he’d go there.

He eyed me carefully as he continued, “It’s clear he means to use you for something. And judging from the way he was talking, you have some clue what that might be. So —”

“Okay, stop right there,” Amelia said, casually interrupting Zelgadis.

“What?”

“I don’t want to know what that jerk is planning.”

“You don’t?” Zel arched an eyebrow at this unexpected reaction. I mirrored the expression.

“Nope. Not one bit,” Amelia insisted.

“That’s... unexpected. You really don’t wanna know? Isn’t universal truth and justice, like, your motto?” I asked.

She grinned abashedly as she answered, “That’s exactly why I *don’t* want to know! There’s no way Hellmaster is up to anything good, so if you tell me what he’s really plotting, I might be forced to stop you from going—even if it means abandoning Master Gourry. And I don’t want to do that, so... I don’t want to hear it.”

“That... makes sense,” Zelgadis admitted with a wry smile at Amelia. “Then I won’t ask either. I doubt knowing Hellmaster’s plan will help us stop him, anyway.”

“You guys are sure?” I asked hesitantly.

“Who cares?” Amelia responded with a bright smile.

“We’re going to go save Master Gourry together. That’s what matters, right?”

To be honest... I’d never been happier to have companions in my life.

Sairaag was the heart of the Empire of Lyzeille. Or, at least, it used to be. It had flourished long ago as the City of Magic until it was destroyed by the magical beast Zanaaffar, after which it became known by a far more horrifying nickname: the City of the Dead. It eventually revived,

however, and grew into a thriving metropolis once more... until very recently, when a certain incident had laid waste to the land once more.

Well, “a certain incident” makes it sound all nice and neutral, but as it just so happens... I kinda sorta had a hand in that one.

Point is, the area was a barren wasteland now. I’d seen it devastated with my own eyes, so I could speak with some authority on that point. The only living thing still standing should be the large tree at the center of the city... It made me wonder what reason Hellmaster could possibly have for calling me there. Whatever it was, though, I assumed it would become clear once I arrived.

Under ideal conditions, Sairaag was a twenty-day trip from our starting location in the Kingdom of Dils. Fortunately, with Chaos Dragon dead, there wasn’t anyone left to try to stop us along the way. I expected smooth sailing the entire time.

Which left me with no other recourse...

“Mega Brand!”

Bwooom! My spell flashed in the darkness, and sent bandits flying!

“Graaagh!”

We were now three nights into our journey, and I was feeling pretty stressed out. I didn’t know if Gourry was safe. I didn’t know if I could stop Fibrizo’s plot. Hell, I couldn’t even stop my own head from spinning when I tried to bed down for the night, which left me with a nasty case of insomnia.

So what better way to set a maiden’s mind at ease than a bit of bandit bullying? Gotta work off the day’s tension! Vent all that resentment to the world! No rights for the wicked, as I always say! Besides, beating up bandits earns you a sweet combo of local gratitude and heaps of treasure (liberated from the ill-gotten stash, of course)! There’s just nothin’ like it!

I’m sure some of you might be thinking this behavior is a

“leopard can’t change its spots” situation... And you’d be right! I dare say this is my purpose in life! Yeah, I went there. Excuses be damned! I don’t need to apologize for the fact that bandit bullying is in my blood!

Accordingly, I’d slipped out of our inn in the middle of the night, found the local bandit hideout on the outskirts of town, and immediately got going on the blowy-uppy.

“Why are you doing this?! What did we do to you?!” cried one of the brigands as he collapsed in front of me.

“Aw, you didn’t do nothin’! I’m just kinda in a bad mood,” I said with my cutest smile.

“Y-You’re just in a bad mood?!” The bandit clearly didn’t appreciate my honesty. “That’s ridiculous!”

“Arggggh! You don’t get to devote your life to crime and then complain about unfair treatment! Now make with the loot before I make with the pain!”

“No! That’s mean!”

“It’s exactly what you do to other people all the time!”

Granted, those who abided by the golden rule generally shied away from the whole bandit gig...

“D-Dammit...” the bandit muttered, but then I caught a glint in his eye.

Oho...

“F-Fine,” he said, suddenly compliant. “I’ll hand over the loot, okay? Just spare my life! Please!”

Ignoring his transparent ploy, I quietly began chanting a spell and then turned to look behind me. As I expected, there was a man with a bow and arrow trained on me some distance away.

Too slow, sucker! Bandit No. 1 was probably just stalling me while Bandit No. 2 set up to shoot me in the back. Too bad the look in his eyes and the surge of hostility behind me had tipped me off. I was about to unleash my spell on the would-be sniper, when all of a sudden...

Whom! Something burst through the archer’s chest, and he collapsed on the spot. The smell of blood wafted my way

on the night air.

It wasn't me, I swear! I hadn't even had the chance to toss my spell yet, and the killing blow had come from behind the guy.

The other bandits around him began to fall too. Some lost their heads, and some had their chests blasted open as balls of light began flying willy-nilly from the trees.

"Wh-What?!" I gasped.

I swiftly turned my attention away from the panicking bandits to search for nearby presences. The trees of the surrounding forest looked like lurking black beasts beneath the crescent moon sky. There was a keen feeling of hostility hanging in the air like a cold draft all around me. Of course, it wasn't from the bandits. *Could it be...?*

"I've found you, Lina Inverse," said a voice on the wind from everywhere and nowhere at once. It was none other than...

"Rashart?!" I called, shouting the name of the man I knew had to be hiding somewhere nearby.

"Indeed," his voice echoed from the darkness, his figure yet to be seen.

General Rashart was one of Chaos Dragon's lieutenants... He didn't compare to Xellos, Gaav, or Fibrizo, but he was still a high-ranked demon. The last we saw him, he was pursuing the injured Xellos on Dragons' Peak. I hadn't heard from him since then, and with everything else going on, he'd frankly slipped my mind altogether...

"Hey, I totally forgot about you. You're not very memorable, y'know? Did you finish off Xellos or what?" I said into the dark while continuing to scan for his presence.

"I'm afraid not," he responded casually enough, with no real sense of vexation.

"So? What brings you here?"

"I think you know what," he said slimily, like a predator to its prey. "You and Xellos have put me through an awful lot. Sir Raltark is gone because of you... and even my master,

Lord Chaos Dragon Gaav, fell victim to Hellmaster's trap..."

Wait, don't tell me...

"Hang on. Don't say you're here to avenge him or some nonsense like that."

"And if I am?" Rashart responded, his voice perfectly placid.

Hey, wait a minute!

"H-Hang on here! Think about it for a sec! The real one at fault is Fibrizo for planning all this! *He's* the one you should want revenge on!" I said, trying to shift the blame in my panic.

To be honest, I really didn't want to fight this guy... He was so forgettable that it was easy to think of him as some punk, but that was only true relative to the other big-name demons we'd been dealing with.

Rashart was still the General of the Dragon, meaning it would take more than a couple of Dragon Slaves to ice him. Meanwhile, Xellos had scarpered off and Hellmaster was kicking back in Sairaag... which left me without a whole lot of confidence that I could win solo under the current circumstances.

"Take revenge on Hellmaster, you say?" Rashart replied quietly. "It's obvious who'd come out the victor of that conflict. No, the only way to have my revenge on Hellmaster is to eliminate the linchpin of his plan."

"Wait a minute! You don't mean—" I started, but before I could finish...

Zing! There was a sharp sound, and balls of light appeared all around me!

"?!"

Vwoosh! Light flashed and sound roared as the orbs cut through the night. I managed to fall back in the nick of time to avoid them.

"But of course you could dodge that," said a voice nearby.

I could now see the figure of a man hovering in the dark. He held a sword in its right hand, and he was dressed in

draconic armor... Needless to say, it was Rashart. Without so much as glancing at the scrambling bandits, the Dragon General locked eyes on me.

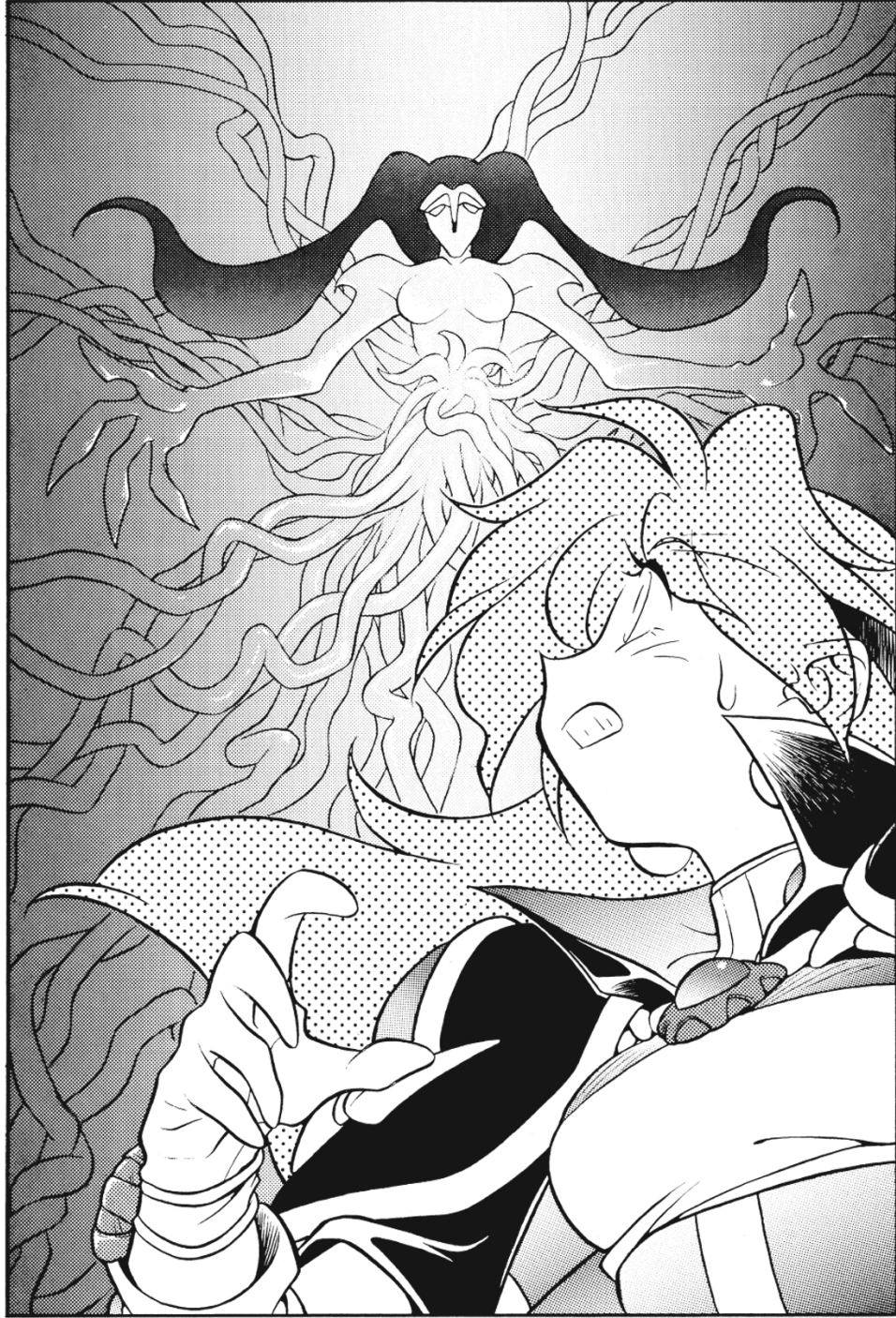
“But you can’t keep it up forever. Mordirag!”

At Rashart’s cry, I felt a spike of malice behind me!

Another one?!

I leaped to the side, knowing I didn’t have time to glance back. A red beam of light streaked through the dark and struck the ground not far from me... I managed to dodge it, and when I finally turned around, I saw something hovering behind me. It looked a lot like a human woman... but only her upper half. She had a perfectly beautiful, expressionless face like a mask; translucent, white skin; and long hair the color of a new moon.

Then, below her waist was just... lots of dangling bits in disarray. Were they intestines? Roots? I couldn’t really tell. She watched me with an expressionless face while hanging in the air all creepy-like, in that particular way meant to give little kids nightmares.



“Wow... So you still got a couple of weirdos sticking by you, huh?” I blustered to Rashart, keeping a careful eye on both him and the abomination he’d called forth.

Rashart smiled confidently in response: “I can also call as many brass and lesser demons as I like. I could summon them now and overwhelm you with sheer numbers, to be sure... But one capable ally should be enough to keep you from escaping.”

Yeah, of course. Going for the quality over quantity, huh? To be honest... things weren’t looking good for me here. From where I stood, Mordirag seemed to be on par with the likes of Duguld and Guduza, two demons I’d fought before. I could probably beat her, but only in a one-on-one fight. If she was here to support Rashart, then just getting away from them was gonna be tricky. *What to do, then?*

“Let us begin, Lina Inverse!” Rashart declared before I could come up with a plan. On his cue, countless balls of light appeared around him.

“Ngh!” I leaped to the side and dove behind a nearby tree.

Wham! One energy ball smashed through the tree as I ran out from its cover, chanting a spell as I went. But before I could finish it... I spotted a ripple of mist in the darkness ahead of me. Mordirag’s white form then appeared.

Teleportation, huh?! Luckily, I had anticipated this!

“Elemekia Lance!”

As the white demon manifested, I unleashed my completed spell! This puppy was designed to deal damage directly to an opponent’s spirit. It wouldn’t be enough to beat Mordirag, but it would at least hurt so long as it hit. She should dodge, then, and I’d use that opening to run past her. At least, that was the plan, but...

Zing! Mordirag wordlessly formed and released a spear of light, which effortlessly shot down the one I’d thrown her way.

What?!

Mordirag then produced a second spear of light right on the heels of the first. I didn't have time to cast another spell, so I quickly rolled forward.

Okay! In that case...

As I started on my next chant, I heard Rashart's voice echo behind me: "Give in, Lina Inverse!"

I made a sudden change of course again just before an explosion flashed beside me. I bobbed and weaved through the ensuing series of attacks, all while dashing in a direction not too far from where Rashart loomed. And just as I'd predicted, Mordirag appeared again to block my way. The second she did...

Got her! I unloaded my spell! "Dragon Slave!"

This one drew from the power of Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, the dark lord of our world. Even if it wasn't enough to take Mordirag out, it should deal plenty of damage! That would give me an opening.

At my call, a scarlet light born from darkness began to coalesce in the white demon's direction. And just then—*Roarr!*—an animalistic howl rang out behind me. With that, the vermillion light of my Dragon Slave diffused powerlessly into the night.

What?!

"Not so fast!" Rashart proclaimed triumphantly.

Oh, duh! He'd banished my Dragon Slave aimed at Mordirag in the nick of time. That's the power of a high-ranked demon for you...

Things were starting to look grim. I couldn't defeat Mordirag, I couldn't run away... Was lying down and dying basically the only way this ended for me? I knew I could probably take out one of these guys with a Ragna Blade, but if they dodged it, I'd be toast. And even if I *did* get 'em, the spell would drain me to the point of leaving me totally vulnerable to the surviving demon. Which meant—

I was mentally weighing my options as I prepared to leap away from another spear of light from Mordirag... when my

foot slipped.

Damn! I was about to pitch over, but managed to keep my balance and jump to my right. Except...

"Ngh!"

I felt a burning sensation shoot up my left leg. I couldn't keep myself upright when I landed, and thus collapsed on the spot. I'd never felt pain like this before... Slipping had apparently kept me from dodging the spear entirely. I looked down and saw my boot charred all the way up to my ankle. I couldn't tell how serious it really was from a glance, but I couldn't feel my foot, much less move it.

"It seems this is the end, Lina Inverse," Rashart said as he slowly approached. "You won't be running anywhere with your leg in that condition."

He didn't get too close, but rather stayed back to observe me. Mordirag remained silent, still floating in the air some distance away.

"You're quite capable for a human, but in the end, that's all you are. Hellmaster deserves the blame for dragging you into this, but don't think for a moment that I'll grant you a quiet death—" Rashart suddenly stopped mid-sentence and turned toward the white demon. "Mordirag!"

His voice was met with another cry through the darkness: "Ra Tilt!"

That was Amelia's voice! But the second before her spell hit, the white demon vanished into the darkness.

"Tch... What an annoying interruption." Rashart clicked his tongue, then turned back to me. "You get to live... for now. But I have time. Don't expect to make it safely to Sairaag."

And with that, Dragon General Rashart likewise vanished.

"Lina!" In that same moment, Amelia and Zelgadis came bursting through the brush. "Are you okay?!"

"I just hurt my leg a little... What are you two doing here?"

"You were bound to attract rubberneckers with all that

noise you were making this close to the village. Now, how bad is it?" Amelia asked, looking at my leg and frowning before beginning a Resurrection chant. Recovery would have sufficed for any normal wound, so I guess I was worse off than I'd imagined.

"The enemy that disappeared before we arrived... It was Rashart, wasn't it?" Zelgadis asked.

I nodded and explained, "I think he wants to avenge Gaav."

"Avenge him?" Zel replied, scowling slightly. "That's... impressively loyal, for a demon."

"I agree. He brought that white demon—I think you saw her—Mordirag with him."

"Then that means..."

"Yeah," I whispered, gazing up at the sky with narrowed eyes. "This journey might be more complicated than I thought..."

Carriages came and went along the wide street, cutting through the waves of people that flooded the avenue. Stalls were lined up on either side of the road with barkers loudly hawking their goods all around us.

We were currently in Ruald, a trading city near the southern border the Kingdom of Dils shared with the Kingdom of Ralteague. It had been six days since we'd first set out, and we were finally almost into the next country.

The plan was to pass through here into Ralteague, from which we'd enter the Lyzeille Empire and take the main road to Sairaag. Passing through multiple nations might make it sound like we were taking the scenic route, but this was actually the shortest way to our destination.

"All right, we'll stay here for the night," I declared.

"Huh?!" Amelia shouted in surprise. "But why? Master Gourry is in the hands of the enemy, and Rashart is after us! We need to keep moving! Besides, once we reach Sairaag, Rashart won't be able to touch us! We must reach the next

town with the utmost haste!" she insisted, pointing determinedly in a random direction.

She wasn't wrong, but... striking a fiery justice pose like that in the middle of a crowd? Really? She was certainly in her element, but I was a little embarrassed to be seen with her.

Wow... even Zelgadis had walked away, pretending not to know her.

"Listen, Amelia..." I managed to pull her away by her clenched fist and whisper into her ear, "It's true that Rashart won't be a problem once we hit Sairaag... but that's because we'll be dealing with Fibrizo instead."

"Urk..."

The mere mention of Hellmaster's name put beads of sweat on Amelia's brow. Rashart was a tough opponent indeed, but Fibrizo waiting for us in Sairaag was a far more fearsome foe.

"I agree that we should hurry and that we have plenty of daylight left," I admitted. "But if we take off now, it'll be dark before we reach the next town. Spending the night camping out would be like *asking* Rashart to attack. And even if he doesn't, we'll just be exhausting ourselves... which'll only slow us down more in the long run, right?"

"I suppose..." Amelia stared straight at me, thoughtfully. "But Lina, aren't you worried about Master Gourry?"

"Well, of course I am, but..." I found myself averting my eyes and scratching my cheek. "I'm pretty sure Gourry's the kind of guy who wouldn't stay dead if you killed him, y'know? I get the feeling he's probably okay... Though I can't exactly say why."

"I see..." she whispered, seeming to accept my answer. "Then I guess we're spending the night here."

"Yeah. We'll find an inn nearby and drop off our stuff," I said.

With that, I started to look around... and my eyes froze on a single point down the road. I'd caught a glimpse of

someone in the middle of the teeming crowd.

"What's wrong, Lina?" Amelia asked.

Still staring, I answered, "Might just be my imagination, but... I thought I saw... over there, just now..."

"Saw what?"

"A familiar face."

"Who, though?"

I hesitated for a second, then quietly uttered his name...
"Hellmaster Fibrizo."

"No way!" she cried out in equal disbelief. "He said he was going to Sairaag! Why would he be here?!"

"I don't know. Could just be a case of mistaken identity..." I said, then felt my throat seize up.

For right in my sight line, weaving through the tightly packed crowd... I caught another glimpse of a small figure in a dark cape. That slightly wavy, black hair. That pretty face easily mistakable for a girl's. And those childish, inhuman eyes that had definitely cast a glance my way...

That's him. It has to be!

No sooner had I thought that than he disappeared into the crowd.

"I saw him! That way!" I cried, dashing off in pursuit.

Pushing through the throng, I made it to where I'd just seen him, but Hellmaster—or the boy I'd assumed to be Hellmaster—was already gone.

"You're sure it was him?" Zelgadis asked as he caught up.

"I'm sure... I think," I responded without much confidence. I'd felt so certain in the moment, but I really had only seen him for a second. And now he was g—

"There!" Amelia shouted out suddenly, pointing to a street corner where a short, caped figure was turning off the thoroughfare into an alley.

"After him!" I declared, battling my way through the crowd once more to give chase.

We reached the alley, which was really less of a proper alleyway and more just a gap between buildings. It was

barely wide enough for us to pass through single file. The red brick walls that towered on either side of us smothered the narrow passageway in darkness. I could see a faint bit of light up ahead, suggesting that the alley dumped out onto another street. The boy was just a black silhouette against the distant illumination as he walked deeper and deeper into the alley ahead of us.

I could only see his silhouette from behind, but it looked just like him... just like Hellmaster Fibrizo.

"Wait!" I called, but he didn't seem to hear me. He simply kept walking on in silence.

With no other choice, I darted after him. Amelia and Zel quickly followed. The alley was so skinny that my pauldrons were scraping the walls, but I didn't have time to take them off.

I wasn't sure if the boy knew he was being pursued or not, but he quickly turned right into a different alley. Of course, if this was really Hellmaster Fibrizo, he'd know we were after him.

The boy remained silent, slipping down one dark, narrow alley after another. Despite his leisurely gait, we were running to keep up and couldn't seem to close the gap. That suggested, at the very least, that we weren't dealing with any ordinary human.

After a bit more chase, we suddenly came out into an open space about the size of a small house. It didn't strike me as an intentionally created plaza or anything. It was surrounded by tall, windowless brick walls that cast it in shadow.

I glanced around and didn't spy anyone in the square, or down any of the alleys that emptied into it for that matter.

"He's... gone?" Zel whispered shortly.

The disappearing act wasn't much of a surprise. If this was Fibrizo, blinking through space was child's play to him. I couldn't imagine why he'd lured us here just to ditch us, though...

Or... does this mean...

"Thank you for coming, Lina Inverse," a familiar voice hailed from behind us, back down the alley we'd just come from.

I whipped around to see the petite, black-cloaked boy standing there. He definitely *looked* like Hellmaster Fibrizo, but...

"I knew you'd follow me if I took this form," he said.

The voice that came from his mouth was that of a grown man—General Rashart. His appearance flickered and faded, and the next instant, it transformed into the recognizable man clad in dragon armor.

"Yeah... Guess I walked right into this one," I admitted ruefully.

High-ranked demons chose their human forms at will, so it stood to reason that they could alter them just as easily. It stood to reason, then, that Rashart could take the appearance of Fibrizo if he so desired.

"You interrupted me right before I could finish things last time... but you can't escape now."

Rashart was right. There was no way for us to safely get away. Even if I ducked into an alleyway, he could nail me with one of his energy balls or some other magic projectile. And though she hadn't shown herself yet, I was quite certain Mordirag was lurking close by too.

This was the General of the Dragon we were up against. And because we were in the middle of a city, I couldn't use any of my flashier spells. I knew I was at a huge disadvantage here, but now that we were in the thick of things, I had no choice but to give it my all!

We each began chanting our own spells, and then...

"Let us begin!" Rashart roared, his voice echoing through the square.

2: General Rashart Stands in Our Way

“Hsshah!” With a snakelike hiss, Rashart slashed downward with his blade. We were far outside his reach, so it shouldn’t have hit anything, but...

Vreew! Something like a shock wave produced by the swing cut through the air toward us! The three of us quickly leaped away as it blew past and disappeared against a brick building behind us. There was no sign of damage to the wall, but that didn’t mean the attack was harmless to humans.

Welp, time to fight back! I unleashed the spell I’d finished chanting: “Dam Blas!”

This one converted magical power into a wave of vibration to pulverize a target. Obviously, it couldn’t damage pure demons—let alone one as powerful as Rashart—due to their fundamentally spiritual nature. But I wasn’t aiming for the General of the Dragon. Nope! I was going for a nearby brick wall!

In all honesty, I had a grand total of two spells that could potentially defeat General Rashart. One was Ragna Blade, which had even taken a chunk out of Chaos Dragon Gaav. But because it manifested as a sword, I’d have to get close and physically hit him with it for it to work. And if I brandished it out here, he could float up out of my range and play keep-away as long as he wanted. I’d be burning up my own magic power for nothing.

So to avoid that, I was gonna bust through the closest wall to make it look like I was escaping. And then when he came after me, I’d nail him with my Ragna Blade in the confined indoor space! Or such was my plan, anyway.

But my Dam Blas smashed into the wall... and that was it. A spell that should've turned solid rock to powder didn't so much as crack the bricks.

"What?!" I shouted in shock.

"It's no use, Lina Inverse! You still haven't caught on? You're already inside my barrier! None of your attack spells can affect the city environment! You're trapped!" Rashart said mockingly.

Of course... he's gonna keep us here until it's over, one way or another.

But to take another perspective on the situation, that also meant I could Dragon Slave the whole area without causing any damage to the city. Of course, there was still a question of whether *we'd* escape unscathed...

While I was thinking through all that, Amelia completed her spell: "Ra Tilt!"

Yet the moment before she unleashed it, I saw a slight ripple go through Rashart's body. He was bathed in the pillar of pale blue flame all the same... and then appeared to shatter within the azure light!

"Did I do it?!" Amelia called out uncertainly.

Unfortunately not! The air behind her contorted and Rashart appeared, his sword heaved aloft! He'd left a fragment of his spiritual form behind as a decoy while he blinked through space—a trick I'd seen another demon use in the past. Rashart took aim at Amelia, and...

"Ra Tilt!"

This one came from Zel. He must not have seen it coming, because the Dragon General was truly doused in flame this time!

"Graaah!"

Rashart let out a howl of rage. But... that was all. Amelia sprang back from where she stood, and almost simultaneously, the pillar of blue light fizzled out of existence.

"Impudent brat!" Rashart roared, his face twisted with

rage as he released another shock wave from his sword.

Zel easily dodged it. But just then, the air near him warped and the white demon Mordirag appeared—right behind him!

“What?!” He didn’t even have time to regain his balance after dodging before Mordirag hit him head-on with a magical arrow! “Gah!”

It knocked poor Zel straight to the ground. He’d clearly survived the strike, but if I didn’t finish this up fast, things might really start to go pear-shaped. Time to focus on Mordirag, who I at least stood a chance against!

“Ragna Blast!” I incanted.

The split second I released the spell, the white demon vanished into thin air. My magical pillar unleashed its dark plasma on nothing.

Mordirag had disappeared a little *too* quickly to be fleeing my attack... She’d probably decided on a hit-and-run strategy in advance. I had to say, that was going to be a real pain in the ass for us. Where would she next appear? When? And who would she be going after?

The fact that this was all up in the air made it almost impossible to anticipate where she’d strike next, and catching her with a spell would require committing to a chant in advance. In other words, dealing with Mordirag was going to be tough. We might stand a chance with Gourry’s Sword of Light, but there was no point in lamenting what we didn’t have... This just meant my only option was to take out Rashart with a Ragna Blade!

And if that was the case, then it was time to put the plan into action! No room for hesitation! Using the power of my amplification talismans, I began chanting my spell...

*Blade forged of the freezing black void,
Be released under heaven’s seal
Become mine, become part of me
Let us mete destruction as one
Smash even the souls of the gods...*

It was Ragna Blade—although the imperfect version. The perfected one would certainly have more power, but it would exhaust me that much faster. If I missed the first strike, I wouldn't get a second. This one would still drain me pretty quickly, but I could keep it up a little longer and it should still pack quite a punch.

I dashed at Rashart, and...

"Hrngh?!" By the time he realized what I was doing and turned toward me, I was already up in his face!

"Ragna Blade!" I cried, activating the spell at close range! In my readied hands, a blade of pure darkness appeared! I immediately slashed at Rashart, but...

"Tch!" With no more than a click of his tongue, he leaped to the side and evaded my strike.

Was Rashart faster than I thought?! Given our proximity, I had assumed he would parry. I never dreamed he'd be able to dodge it... As if wary of my dark blade, Rashart quickly backed away from me.

Argh, okay! Time for experiment number one! With my Ragna Blade still active, I ran past where Rashart was standing and sliced into a brick wall.

Vrum! Yes! It worked! The wall protected by Rashart's barrier effortlessly gave way under my black blade!

"No!" Rashart shouted in shock.

All right! Keep it up! With a little fancy bladework, I cut open a hole just large enough for a person to pass through. What was I doing, you ask? What else? I was falling back on my original plan—leading Rashart indoors to challenge him blade to blade!

That said, I was already feeling the draining effects of my spell. Keeping the incomplete Ragna Blade active, even for this short a time, was taking everything I had.

Still, I have to try! Yet just as I thought that...

Rashart leaped back, putting a great distance between us and him.

"You broke through my barrier, but no matter... we'll settle

this next time!" he shouted, then disappeared into thin air without waiting for a response.

"Huh?" Amelia scowled at his extremely abrupt departure.

"Did he really leave? Or is he just making it look that way?" Zelgadis asked, hauling himself to his feet and carefully scanning the area for a hidden Rashart.

But none of us could sense another presence anywhere nearby.

"I think he's really gone," I whispered, then finally let myself breathe easy.

"Hmm..." I grumbled, poking at my wine-braised lamb with a knife and fork. It wasn't that the food was bad. It wasn't the best thing I'd ever eaten, but it was perfectly palatable. I just had something on my mind. It had now been three days since the attack in Ruald City. Rashart hadn't come after us again since, and we'd finally crossed the border into the Empire of Lyzeille.

"What's the matter, Lina?" Amelia asked, prompted by my grumbling, as she packed in her own share of wine-steamed lobster in cream sauce.

"Well... it's just... I've been mulling over a few things," I said, noshing a bite of a carrot garnish.

"Things?"

"Yeah. Rashart withdrew in Ruald City pretty readily after I broke through his barrier. It was weird."

"He's always been like that, though," Amelia replied, popping a potato into her mouth. "Remember? He doesn't want to get innocent people hurt."

"Yeah, I know... I'm just trying to figure out why that is," I whispered, a wrinkle forming on my brow.

Amelia and Zel shot me curious glances, clearly puzzled as to why this was suddenly a concern.

"To get the dragons and elves on their side, right? Their way of saying, 'We're not like those Kataart bastards,'" Zel put forward.

“And to help stay under the radar,” Amelia added. “They were afraid Hellmaster and his lot would catch on to them if they made too much noise. Although it turned out that was for naught.”

“Right...” I nodded absently in response. Those were indeed the most likely reasons the Chaos Dragon faction had been so careful to avoid collateral damage. I understood that much. But—

“Mistress Lina?!” someone suddenly called out from the entrance to the restaurant.

Huh? That sounds like... I turned around in surprise and saw a familiar figure. It was a girl of about twenty with long, silky black hair and pale purple vestments.

“Sylphiel?!”

Indeed, this was the cleric we’d met in Sairaag and later accompanied to Saillune. The last time I saw her, she’d fainted from the dream-crushing trauma of meeting Sir Phil and finding out what he was *really* like... But, naturally, she would’ve had to wake up eventually.

“What’s up, Sylphiel? What are you doing here?” I asked her as she made her way past the tables to approach us.

“I’ve heard stories of bandit gangs being destroyed throughout the area, and when I arrived in the city, there were rumors of a flat-chested sorceress gobbling her way through the menu at this inn. So I thought...”

Is she trying to start something? Sylphiel was a stunning beauty who spoke with utmost politeness all the time, but damn if she didn’t have a nasty streak.

“I’m not talking about that! I’m asking what you’re doing here in Lyzeille!”

“Ah, well, first...” Sylphiel turned to face Zelgadis. “It’s been quite some time. Thank you for all your assistance back in Sairaag.”

“Sure. I’m not good at pleasantries, but... I’m glad you seem to be doing okay.”

“I am, thank you,” she said, now turning to Amelia. “And

who might this be?”

“Amelia Wil Tesla Saillune,” Amelia said, standing up and bowing politely.

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you. I’m Sylphiel Nells Ruda —” Sylphiel started, and then her smile froze on her face.

“Amelia Wil Tesla... Saillune?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“That’s right,” Amelia said.

I leaned over to whisper into Sylphiel’s ear, “She’s the daughter of your beloved Prince Philionel.”

“Noooooooo! Don’t say thaaat! Don’t remiiind me!” Sylphiel screamed, clutching her head and sobbing.

Seemed she was still pretty traumatized. I totally understood how she felt, of course. I was more or less desensitized to it by now, but calling that oaf a prince still gave me the willies.

Zelgadis, who hadn’t met Sir Phil for himself, and Amelia, who had grown up with the guy, were kinda left out in the cold by our little exchange.



"I-Incidentally," Sylphiel said, recovering with some effort and looking straight at me, "it appears that Sir Gourry is not with you..."

Urrrgh! That's right... She was kinda sweet on Gourry, wasn't she?

"Don't tell me..." With that, she drew closer, and I instinctively scooted back in my chair. "Don't tell me, Mistress Lina... that you sold him off!"

"Of course not!"

"Then did you steal the Sword of Light and abandon him by the roadside?!"

"Just what do you take me for?!"

"Then tell me what happened to Sir Gourry!"

"H-He's, uh..."

"Where is he?!"

"Well, shucks, see... the ol' lug went and got himself kidnapped by Hellmaster Fibrizo... teehee!"

A short second later...

"Ooh..." Sylphiel fainted dead away. "But this is no time for fainting, is it?" Yet she revived with remarkable speed and took a seat next to me. Her knees were trembling a little bit though, so she didn't seem entirely recovered. "May I ask exactly what transpired?"

Zel, Amelia, and I all shared a glance. The circumstances were easy enough to explain, but doing so would mean dragging Sylphiel into the middle of things. Still, realistically, I'd already mentioned Hellmaster's name. Moreover, I wasn't sure the "I can't tell you because it would get you mixed up in this" approach would be enough to convince Sylphiel to stay away.

"Let's see..." After a moment's thought, I let out a sigh. "Okay, before I tell you, I need to be sure of one thing. We're caught up in some pretty serious business. Telling you means you'll be involved one way or another. I mean, I guess you sticking your head in the dirt might still be an option, but... Well, anyway, you still want to hear it?"

"Yes," she said, immediately and without hesitation.

"Okay. Here goes..."

And so I gave her a quick rundown of recent events. With Xellos. With Chaos Dragon. With the Claire Bible. With Hellmaster. With Gourry getting kidnapped. How we were on our way to Sairaag after him. And how the surviving member of the Gaav faction, General Rashart, was now trying to kill me.

A long minute after I finished my story...

"I see..." Sylphiel whispered softly. Her tone was calm, but I could tell that she was trying to suppress some internal shock. "In other words... he took Sir Gourry away to call *you* to Sairaag?"

"That's... what it boils down to, yeah," I admitted. My survival instincts had me scooting away from her a little.

"I see, I see..." But she just kept repeating those words as if working something out in her mind.

"Um... Sylphiel?" I prompted.

At this, she finally looked up at me and immediately changed the subject: "That's right... I haven't told you yet why I'm here."

"R-Right..."

Ignoring my slight bewilderment, she began her tale: "I've been staying with my uncle, a magical doctor in Saillune City, and working as his assistant. One day, a patient of ours came in with a curious story. This man is a traveling merchant, you see, and he told us that when he last passed through Sairaag some time ago... the large tree was gone. He wasn't sure what had happened to it."

"Wait, Flagoon's gone?" I said, frowning thoughtfully at Sylphiel's words.

Flagoon was a great tree that stood at the heart of Sairaag City, absorbing ambient miasma in order to grow. Now that Sairaag had been destroyed again, it should be the only thing standing in the middle of a desolate wasteland, but...

"Do you mean, like... it fell? Or someone cut it down?" I asked.

But Sylphiel shook her head and replied, "No. He said it was quite literally missing."

Missing? Are you kidding me? Flagoon was... well, not quite as big as a mountain, but at least as big as a sizable hill. Its trunk was as broad as a city block in places. How could something so huge just up and vanish?

"I too thought it was strange, so pressed him for more details, but..."

"But what?"

"His answers merely confused me more," she said quietly. "The more I asked, the less anything he said made sense. And when I voiced my concerns and asked him for clarification... he said that the city of Sairaag was *there*."

"Huh?" I stopped my cup of tea halfway to my mouth, baffled by her words. "The city was *there*? What does that mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like, apparently. That Sairaag was present and full of people, as though it had never been destroyed. Flagoon alone was missing."

"Huh..." I whispered thoughtfully, my brows knitted.

I could say with absolute certainty that Sairaag was a *former* city. Zel, Sylphiel, and I had seen it laid waste with our own eyes. That was only about half a year ago, and you didn't go from "barren wasteland" to "functioning metropolis" in that kind of time. The part about Flagoon being missing just made it all the weirder.

"You're sure he didn't have it confused with some other city?" Amelia asked in the silence. "Even I know about the big tree in the middle of Sairaag. I also know that the city was destroyed by some unknown force recently... There's no way it could have bounced back already."

"Destroyed by some unknown force"?

"Oh..." Zel and I said at the same time, instinctively exchanging a glance. Now that I thought about it, we'd

never filled Amelia in on the whole Sairaag incident, had we?

"What is it?" she asked, confused.

"Ah, nothing. We'll explain later," Zel replied, hastily waving his hand before turning to Sylphiel. "For now... are you indeed sure the man wasn't simply mistaken?"

"I thought he might be, so I later stopped by a bar that's popular with travelers to ask around... Their stories only deepened the mystery. Those who'd been through Sairaag recently all said the same thing our patient had. But those who'd passed through longer ago said that there was no city, just a large tree in the middle of a wasteland. In other words, something seems to have changed at a definitive point in time."

Hmm... curious indeed.

"Now, if these stories are true... what's going on?" I asked.

"I fear I don't know," Sylphiel said firmly. "That's why I'm on my way to see for myself."

"Really? You're still planning to go to Sairaag after everything I just told you?"

"Of course. I cannot simply turn back knowing that Sir Gourry is a prisoner there. That said..." There, she trailed off briefly as she fell into thought. "I intend to go alone ahead of you."

"What? Why would you do that?"

"Because I wish to save Sir Gourry myself."

"No way!" Amelia, Zel, and I all shouted in perfect harmony.

"This is Hellmaster Fibrizo we're dealing with! Evil incarnate! Master of destruction! Sworn enemy of all creation! You can't fight him alone!" Amelia declared.

"I am aware that it is a fruitless endeavor," Sylphiel responded calmly. "But if Mistress Lina reaches Hellmaster, the consequences will be calamitous. His schemes place the whole world at risk." She cast a meaningful glance in my direction, apparently having put together what Fibrizo was

plotting. "Still, I cannot ask you not to go, nor would I expect you to listen to me... So wouldn't the ideal solution be for someone else to save Sir Gourry first? Setting aside the likelihood of their success."

"Okay, I'll give you that, but still..."

"I will not deny that it terrifies me to be the lone member of the vanguard. But, Mistress Lina, as long as the remnants of the Chaos Dragon faction are after you, I cannot divert numbers from your side. That necessarily means that the best possible plan is for me to go alone."

"Well, maybe, but isn't it a little too risky?"

"Do you know of a less risky plan, Mistress Lina?"

"Urgh..."

She had me there. We were already on our way to Sairaag to rescue Gourry ourselves, so we weren't really in a position to lecture her about risk-taking. Even if we couldn't defeat Hellmaster, I'd still have to come up with a way to outsmart him and get out alive...

That said, I'd learned of one surefire way to get his goat. The golden dragon elder Milgazia had mentioned it when we were leaving Dragons' Peak: *"Maybe I should kill you now while I have the chance."* And he had a point. My death would bring Hellmaster's plans to a grinding halt. But Milgazia didn't go through with it because he said that's how demons like Chaos Dragon Gaav behaved. In the end, he chose to remain on Dragons' Peak rather than get involved, and said goodbye with some cool line about leaving the world in my hands.

Still, there was no guarantee that me prematurely kicking the bucket would ensure Gourry's safety. Plus, even if it foiled his plan, Fibrizo might decide that killing Chaos Dragon was good enough and still chalk it up as a win. And most importantly, I really didn't want to die just yet.

So we'd just kept heading for Sairaag without any real strategy in mind. It was true that Sylphiel's plan was better than no plan at all, but there was no way around the

tremendous danger it posed to her.

"You needn't worry about me. I have no death wish. I know that I will be fighting Hellmaster, yet I do not intend to act recklessly. But I should clarify... I am not asking for your approval of my mission. I am merely informing you of it."

"In other words... it's pointless to try and stop you?" Zel asked.

"Precisely," Sylphiel replied with a firm nod.

Later that night, after we'd split up into our own rooms at the inn, there came a knock at my door. I'd just removed my cape and pauldrons to get some shut-eye when I heard it.

"Mistress Lina, are you awake?" came Sylphiel's voice from the hall.

"Yeah, I'm up," I responded as I unbolted the door.

The beautiful cleric was on the other side, her expression terribly serious. She greeted me with, "There is a matter I wish to discuss with you. May I?"

"Um... sure, yeah. What's up?"

She entered and silently closed the door behind her, then took a seat on the cheap chair in the room. I sat down on the bed across from her.

"Allow me to ask you this bluntly," she said, peering straight into my eyes. "What do you think of Sir Gourry?"

"That he's a jelly-brained sword geek."

My answer was instant, and it struck Sylphiel dumb for some reason.

"That isn't what I meant," she said after a moment. "I mean to ask if you like him or not!"

"Oh, well... I wouldn't be traveling with him if I *didn't* like him. I'd have cold-cocked him and rummaged through his pockets ages ago."

For some reason, this caused Sylphiel's eyes to glaze over. She heaved a deep sigh before responding, "Very well... Allow me to ask another way. When we journeyed together from Sairaag to Saillune City, I asked you why you were

traveling with him. At the time, you said it was because you desired the Sword of Light for yourself. But now it seems the Sword of Light is a demonic entity, and you are unlikely to retrieve it from Hellmaster. So even if we are able to best Hellmaster and save Sir Gourry... will you not lose your reason for traveling with him?"

"Huh..."

Girl had a point. I'd been so focused on Hellmaster that I'd never even thought about it, but she was totally right. The Sword of Light wasn't coming back, and even if it did, Gourry wasn't gonna let me swipe... er, I mean, borrow it from him on a permanent basis.

"Yeah... I guess we wouldn't have any reason to stick together in that case, but..." I said, folding my arms pensively.

For some reason, a pained smile appeared on Sylphiel's face as she asked, "Could it be... that you're trying to think of a reason to remain by his side?"

"Huh?"

"If so... then why? Why is it that you're searching for a reason?" she asked me, still pained.

I, uh, didn't really have an answer. I mean, it was a good question, okay?!

"I see." I wasn't sure what it was that she "saw" exactly, but Sylphiel rose to her feet, her expression unchanged. "I will depart the inn early tomorrow. I promise to find a way to save Sir Gourry."

I was still dumbstruck.

"Goodnight, Mistress Lina," she said, then exited the room.

She left me alone with an unexplainable, strangely uneasy feeling in my chest.

"So she really went for it, huh?" Amelia whispered as we walked a road that cut through a field, bathed in the gentle light of early day. Sylphiel was already gone by the time we

got up that morning. "I sure hope she doesn't do anything too reckless..."

"Well, she said she'd be careful. At the very least, doing things this way means she won't get dragged into our fight with Rashart the next time he attacks. So it's for the best, right?" I offered.

"But from the way she was talking... she's in love with Master Gourry, isn't she?" Amelia responded nervously despite my cavalier tone.

"Huh. Pretty good catch from such a brief acquaintance."

"I mean, it was sorta obvious... But even if she doesn't intend to do anything stupid, once she actually has Gourry right in front of her, she might act without thinking."

Urgh, that was... unfortunately possible. Sylphiel was especially inclined to impulsiveness. But even if we rushed to catch up to her now, she'd be doing her best to stay ahead of us and get to Sairaag first. Gosh, we were running into problems left and right... and now there was another one right in front of us.

We all stopped in our tracks.

Fwsssh... The wind blew through the green grass.

We were the only ones on the road, which stretched on straight into an endless blue horizon. Since there'd been mountains in the distance until a little while ago, I figured we had to be trapped in some kind of spell.

"One of Rashart's barriers!" Amelia said as she carefully scanned the area.

I couldn't see anything other than a flat plain of grass grown as high as my chest. And all of a sudden...

Fwshfwshfwsh! A large ripple moved through the grass to our right like an oversized beast was tearing through it. Whatever it was was cutting a chaotic path, but it was definitely headed our way.

"Incoming!" Zelgadis called out, and suddenly the undulation stopped.

At the exact same time, I felt a hostile presence behind

us. Was the movement in the grass just a feint?! While chanting spells under our breath, all three of us leaped in separate directions. Not a second later, a flash came at us from behind, burning the very wind in its path. I turned back to face its source... and saw nothing but more grass swaying in the wind. The malice I'd felt before was now completely gone.

Had it... blinked away? The moment I thought that, I felt the hostility again. It was behind me—in the same direction the grass had been moving before. I reflexively moved away, then turned back to see...

Vwush! A spear of light pierced through the grass, heading straight for a startled Amelia! She dodged immediately, but earned herself a scorched lock of hair for the trouble. The streak of light then disappeared into the blue sky beyond.

It had come from within the grass. I'd felt a hostile presence there before, but I now saw and felt nothing. I would've caught a glimpse of it if it had teleported, and there was no other sign of anything hiding in the grass either.

Wait, could it be... I began chanting a spell.

Rays of light continued to fly at us, cutting through the grass here and there. Amelia and Zel both had spells at the ready, but being unable to see their opponent forced them to focus on dodging.

And then... I finished my spell: "Zellas Bullid!"

A beam of light streaked from my fingertips and changed its path through the air in accordance with my will. It struck through some of the green ground in one section of the grass!

Graaah! A scream echoed inside my very mind. There was a split-second warping in the scenery around us... And then the view returned to normal, distant mountains and all. Indeed, the barrier was broken.

"That barrier... The ground, the entire world within was

the demon, right, General Rashart?" I asked, turning to the enemy I expected to see.

"Indeed, it was me," said a voice as Rashart appeared from a ripple in the air. He was wearing his trademark deep red armor. "Well solved. I thought it would give you more trouble than that..."

The lack of bravado in his voice suggested that my blow had done a number on him. But even if it had been in barrier form, the idea that I'd been *inside* this dude for a little while kinda skeeved me out.

"No matter... I'll just have to fight you face-to-face!" he declared, drawing his sword in one smooth stroke.

Right on cue, Amelia unleashed her spell: "Ra Tilt!"

"Useless!" Rashart barked, sweeping his sword upward and slicing vertically through the blue pillar of flame!

Without missing a beat, Zel fired one of his own: "Ra Tilt!"

This time, Rashart's body was shrouded in azure light proper!

"Graaah!"

His screams echoed around us, but that one strike wouldn't be enough to defeat him. Amelia quickly fired off another Ra Tilt—just as a second malicious presence appeared behind us!

Mordirag?!

Too bad for her I was expecting this kind of sneak attack now. I turned around and let fly the spell I'd meant for Rashart.

"Gaav Flare!"

A tongue of magical flame sprang from my extended right palm and leaped at the white demon—or so it should have. But the key words of power meant to activate the spell just drifted uselessly away on the wind...

What? My spell didn't work?! My incantation, my gestures, and my mental control were all flawless. So why...

While my words echoed emptily, Mordirag fired several spears of light in Amelia's direction. Fortunately, she dodged

them all with ease.

For real though, why hadn't my spell activated? Rashart hadn't sealed my magic while I was in his barrier space the way Mazenda had once, had he? This called for a quick experiment! Thus I laid into a Dragon Slave chant.

Right around that time, Amelia finished her incantation and released a Ra Tilt on Mordirag.

"Rooooooh!" But one howl from Rashart easily shattered it.

Without missing a beat, Zelgadis fired another Ra Tilt at Mordirag.

"You'll never succeed!" Rashart snorted.

Nevertheless, Zel let his spell fly. Rashart roared again to protect Mordirag, but... *Fwoom!* Rather than the white demon, the blue pillar of light engulfed Rashart himself!

"Whaaat?!" he cried out in surprise.

Oh, of course. Zel had made it *look* like he was targeting Mordirag, but he'd gone for Rashart instead by sensing his location on instinct. Still, I doubted that blow would hurt the general any more than the last one had.

"Dragon Slave!" I shouted, firing off my own spell an instant later. A crimson light appeared from thin air, coalescing near Rashart.

Aha! It worked! But Rashart seemed to have been expecting this play, as he promptly cut through my crimson light with his magic sword. *Tch! No dice, huh?*

Still, the fact that I'd successfully used the spell meant my magic wasn't sealed, at least.

What gives, then? I blinked as an idea flashed through my brain. *Could it be?!*

That *would* explain everything... But to see if my theory was right, I'd have to run another test! Thus I started working on a second Dragon Slave.

"Try it all you like, brat! It will never work!"

I easily dodged the shock wave Rashart produced from his sword, then finished my spell.

"Dragon Slave!"

Just as I let that fly...

"Ra Tilt!" Amelia incanted, firing her spell at Mordirag.

Nice! She'd intentionally staggered the timing so she'd hit her target at the same time! Rashart would now have to choose between abandoning Mordirag and eating a Dragon Slave himself to save the white demon. Except...

"Not so fast!" he roared, negating the blue pillar and crimson light at the same time!

Dude extinguished two completely different spells on two different targets simultaneously?! Damn... how could he handle all that? I guess his "Dragon General" title wasn't just to be fancy.

Despite having already taken multiple Ra Tilts, he still seemed to be pretty light on his feet. But... how about this?!

"Dragon Slave!" I determinedly fired another spell at Rashart. As expected, he blocked it easily, but not to be dissuaded, I began chanting another one.

While I was cooking that up, obviously, Amelia and Zel were slinging spells of their own. Sometimes at Rashart, sometimes at Mordirag. And every single one was getting blocked.

This pattern kept up for a while, and then...

Okay, let's try it!

"Dragon Slave!" I shouted, firing it for the umpteenth time. And after Rashart blocked this one too, I made a show of heaving my shoulders and breathing hard. "Ugh... my magic is..."

"What's wrong, Lina Inverse?!" Rashart shouted triumphantly, perhaps having heard my whisper. "Did you use up all your magical power on that pointless spell? You fool!" he proclaimed, holding his sword aloft.

Amelia began chanting a Ra Tilt to try to save me, but just before she finished her incantation...

"Amelia! That way!" I shouted, pointing at the white demon behind me.

She quickly changed her target from Rashart to Mordirag

accordingly. If my theory was indeed correct...

“Ra Tilt!”

This time, the pillar of blue flame successfully swallowed Mordirag’s body!

I knew it!

“Gruuuuungh!” With a groan like the howl of a dying beast, the white demon was consumed by the light.

“No! Mordirag!” Rashart cried regretfully. “Tch! I’ll get you for this someday!” he spat, then glared at Amelia as he disappeared into thin air... Just like I expected.

With the battle seemingly over, Amelia and Zel stood there suspiciously while I was grinning confidently.

“What’s going on here?” Zelgadis asked, casting a dubious glance my way after a period of silence. Amelia was also looking at me, clearly hoping for answers.

Their curiosity was understandable. The way Rashart and I had fought this time didn’t make any sense. I’d spent the last half of the fight mindlessly mashing the Dragon Slave button, and Rashart had failed to defend Mordirag at the most crucial moment.

“I think I found a way to defeat Rashart,” I said with a slight smirk.

The flagstone road went up and over a low hill. To my right was a small forest. Mountains were still visible in the distance, but other than that, it was fields of wheat all around. Once I crested the hill, I should catch my first glimpse of the city.

Bathed in the gentle afternoon sun, I continued up the road alone. Yes, you read that right. *Alone*.

See, I’d sent Amelia and Zel ahead to catch up with Sylphiel. I figured that would make things easier for me. They’d moved out the day after our last attack, and I’d spent the three days since on my own.

As I followed the deserted lane, I came to a sudden stop. I realized I’d passed this way before. That was back when

Gourry and I were on our way to Sairaag, and we'd gotten ambushed right around here... Boy, was this place cursed or what?

"I can sense your hostility a mile away, my dear General. If this was supposed to be an ambush, I can't give you a passing grade," I whispered to the wind.

"I don't see your little escort," a voice replied from behind me.

I turned around, my cape streaming in the breeze, and laid eyes on the Dragon General. His vermillion armor stood out amongst all the greenery.

"I sent them to Sairaag ahead of me. It's a little harder for us to cut loose with them around," I said.

"Oho." A broad smile appeared on Rashart's face. "So you've made your peace with death, then?"

"The opposite. If I go all out, I'm more than enough to handle the likes of you."

"You're bluffing. But either way..."

"Yep! We should probably settle this," I said. I then jumped back to get some distance and moved right into chanting a spell.

"Very well! Have at you!" Rashart held his left palm out, sending a whole mess of magic orbs flying at me!

I leaped to the side. A moment later, the orbs burst against the flagstones at my feet, leaving countless holes in the ground.

Okay! Let's finish this now!

"Dragon Slave!"

"I told you that was pointless!" Rashart jeered.

Little did he know he wasn't my target this time. The crimson light I summoned coalesced on the ground below him! *Kra-koom!* The subsequent explosion shook the air and rustled the grass. Obviously, that wouldn't hurt a pure demon like Rashart. But I wasn't done.

Before all the noise and reverberation died down, I charged at the general through the swirling dust, chanting

my next spell as I ran. When I emerged on the other side, Rashart was practically right in front of me.

“Fool! Did you think you could blind me?!” he howled.

He then raised his sword to unleash another shock wave. He wanted me to dodge so he had a moment to regroup... but I wasn't gonna give it to him!

I kept charging, picking up speed... and then closed my eyes!



“What?!” Rashart shouted in surprise.

If his shock wave had struck then, I would’ve been toast. But...

Vwnn! He released it after a moment’s hesitation, and it breezed past my right ear.

Just so we’re clear, it wasn’t that my unexpected behavior had thrown him off. It was that he *couldn’t actually hit me*.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw Rashart standing before me, trembling with fear. But I didn’t hesitate to cast my spell!

“Ragna Blade!”

Vrum! The dark sword I conjured pierced straight through Rashart’s chest this time.

“You... How did you...”

“You’re just kind of a bad actor, I guess,” I said with a triumphant smile as he looked at me in agony. “Though I guess it’s not fair to compare you to Xellos and Fibrizo, General of the Dragon. Or should I use another name? Since you’re Hellmaster’s lapdog now and all.”

“What?!”

That’s right. Rashart wasn’t doing this to avenge Chaos Dragon. He was shadowing me on Fibrizo’s orders.

How’d I figure that out, you ask? There were too many things that felt off. If he’d really wanted to kill me to show up Hellmaster, there was no need to erect a barrier in Ruald and then make tracks when I busted it. With Chaos Dragon’s plans up in smoke, the easiest way for Rashart to take me out would’ve been to blast the town and flee the scene—collateral damage be damned.

Yet for some reason, any time I was cornered or low on magic power, he’d contrive some reason to bow out first. It was the same in our last fight too. When I was just about out of magic, he went as far as sacrificing Mordirag so that he’d have a reason to retreat. On top of that, he always waited a couple of days before reappearing—in other words, enough time for me to recover physically and magically.

Moreover, despite all his talk of wanting to kill me, whenever we did cross blades, he focused mostly on Amelia and Zel while throwing only perfunctory attacks my way. It took one lousy actor to put on a performance that bad.

But what had really convinced me of my theory was the simple fact that my Gaav Flare spell had failed. It drew upon the power of Chaos Dragon Gaav, so it fizzling meant the dude was toast. Granted, I didn't know exactly what drove demons to serve other demons, but given that full demons like Rashart and Raltark were so devoted to Chaos Dragon Gaav that they'd turned on Ruby-Eye for him, it seemed that they were completely loyal to their progenitor. Chaos Dragon himself was the one exception to this pattern of behavior, thanks to the human will mixed up inside him.

So, all that being said... if Chaos Dragon Gaav really was gone for good, then who was Rashart serving now? The answer was simple. The king of all demons in our world—Dark Lord of the North, Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu—and Hellmaster Fibrizo, his scheming second-in-command.

"Looks like I was right," I whispered, sweeping the black blade to the side.

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaagh!" Rashart's deathly cry shook the very air itself. His body then dissolved into countless red snowflakes, which scattered across the green field.

And with that, General Rashart, puppet first to Chaos Dragon Gaav and then to Hellmaster Fibrizo... finally met his unsung end.

Figuring out that he was now Hellmaster's retainer had given me confidence that he wouldn't kill me even if he tracked me down alone. That was why I'd sent Amelia and Zel ahead and faced the general on my own.

Despite that, I knew that if I used the Ragna Blade normally, he could easily dodge it. That was why I'd started off with a Dragon Slave to get in close and hide the spell I was chanting. Then by closing my eyes just as I reached him, I'd cast him into a moment of uncertainty. He'd

intentionally missed me with the subsequent shock wave, hoping it would scare me off... but I'd taken full advantage of his hesitation and charged in to deal the killing blow.

Still, this made it crystal clear what Hellmaster was after once and for all. Why in the world would Hellmaster send Rashart after me like this? To drive me to the brink, of course. Too bad Rashart couldn't sell the role.

However...

I turned my gaze back to the road up the hill. Beyond it lay Sairaag, the erstwhile City of the Dead. Waiting for me there... was Hellmaster himself.

3: Sairaag, an Illusion of the Past

It wasn't long after I set foot in the forest that I found myself stopping and looking around me.

"Huh... hmm."

Cool air and green smells. No insects or birdsong, just the rustle of leaves... Exactly like the last time I was here.

See, I was currently in the Miasma Forest that grew outside of Sairaag City. It was said that the blood of the magical beast Zanaaffar, vanquished by the Sword of Light, had pooled here long ago and given life to a forest of pure miasma.

But although the sights and sounds were the same as I remembered, the thin air of miasma that had once lingered throughout the woods was now gone without a trace.

Surely this had something to do with Hellmaster, right? But how could that be? Wouldn't his presence make the miasma worse? One way or the other, standing around thinking about it wasn't going to get me answers. This too should become clear once I made it to Sairaag.

Thus I continued to sally forth on my own.

My journey had been smooth sailing since I'd defeated Rashart. I tried upping my pace to catch up with Amelia and Zel, but they must have been hustling themselves, as I still hadn't managed to reach them. I'd asked after them in the villages I'd stopped in, and gleaned that they were two days ahead of me.

I'd learned something else interesting along the way, too. Word on the street was that Sairaag had indeed been rebuilt. The people in the town I'd just left this morning said that the

city had popped up out of nowhere—right along with all the folks who used to live there. Stranger still, if you asked any of said folks what had happened, the answer was always the same: “I can’t say.”

What had Hellmaster done to Sairaag? I had questions upon questions. Most of them weren’t anything I could reason my way around, but damned if I didn’t try to hash it all out as I kept walking... Then suddenly, the view opened up around me.

I’d come out of the forest. Before me lay the metropolis of Sairaag.

Prior to its most recent destruction, the tree Flagoon had stood tall at the city center like a massive monument. But now that trademark piece of the skyline was missing, as if it had just been snatched up out of the ground.

As for the rest of the city, it looked like the stories were true. Even from a distance, I spied people walking the streets. Yet I knew there was no way Sairaag could have magically sprung back to life, so the people had to be illusions created by Fibrizo... or worse, demons.

Nah, if he had that many demons at his disposal, why wouldn’t he just set them loose on the world instead of bothering with all this skullduggery?

There was no question in my mind about one thing, though—if Hellmaster was behind the city’s rebirth, the people of Sairaag were my enemies. To be honest, I would’ve been happy to give this whole place a wide berth, but I’d come too far to simply turn back now. Most importantly, the others were there.

“Welp... guess I’d better get going,” I whispered, then made my way into the city.

Sairaag was the very image of peace. People walked the streets lined with houses and shops. There was laughter in the air as children ran the flagstones, playing. Not one suspicious thing jumped out at me... which actually made it

all the creepier. I'd expected Hellmaster to show up as soon as I set foot in town, all like, "Welcome, Lina Inverse. I've been waiting for you." Yet I hadn't heard a peep from the dude.

Ah well. Guess I'd better find the others before anything else. The fastest way to track them down would be to ask around, but I had minor reservations—okay, make that *major* reservations—about just walking up and starting a conversation with the possible pawns of a hostile demonic overlord. Nonetheless, I knew I wouldn't get anywhere just aimlessly wandering this huge city forever.

Ugh! Fine, just do it already! With a feeling of desperation, I headed for a nearby stall. I bought a juice, paid the vendor, and asked about Zelgadis. I figured he would make more of an impression than Amelia or Sylphiel; if she'd seen a man all in white and hiding his face pass through here, she was bound to remember.

"A man in white, eh?" The shopkeeper, who looked like an ordinary old lady as far as I could tell, thought for a minute and shook her head. "I don't recall. I've been set up here for a while, but..."

"He'd be with a young girl. About my age, with black hair," I added as I drank.

She thought a moment longer, then said, "I'm afraid not... I'm sorry. Why don't you try asking around at the inns?"

"Good idea. Thanks, ma'am."

With that, I polished off my juice and hit the street again.

Hmm... That was a surprisingly normal conversation.

Not that I *wanted* the townspeople to act like obvious servants of Hellmaster. Anyway, that meant it was back to Operation Wander Aimlessly.

What a pain in the neck... I thought as I walked onward. After a while, I heard a voice cut through the din of the hustle and bustle.

"Mistress Lina!"

I turned back to see a familiar form standing across the

road. Her pale-colored vestments and long, shiny black hair helped her stand out in the crowd.

"Sylphiel!" I called, making my way through the throng.

"I'm so glad you're safe," she said. "What happened to the Chaos Dragon servant who was trying to kill you?"

"He's dead as a doornail. Hey, have you seen Amelia or Zelgadis? By my math, they should've made it here a couple of days ago."

"As a matter of fact..." she whispered hesitantly.

"Did... something happen?"

"I haven't seen them. Not since yesterday."

"Yesterday?!"

"Yes. Well... I'll explain on the way." As we proceeded down the lane, Sylphiel continued on awkwardly: "I arrived here five days ago myself. Everything's exactly as it was before the city was razed. I found myself... as if I were being called... walking to the temple, and there..." Her voice was trembling faintly. "There, my father came to greet me. My father... who died that day. He smiled at me as kindly as ever and said, 'Welcome home, Sylphiel.'"

"Sylphiel..." She was a few steps ahead of me, and I could see her shoulders shaking.

"It simply isn't fair. I know... I know they can't really be alive, but I couldn't keep myself from hoping that perhaps, rather than this... it was the destruction of the city that was the illusion, a bad dream." She paused there for a long moment and then let out a heavy sigh before saying firmly, "Forgive me. Let us return to the subject at hand. While it's true that I was partly taken in by the fantasy, I was also able to do some investigating. I believe the place most relevant to our interests... is here."

There, Sylphiel came to a stop. We'd left the avenue at some point and arrived at the heart of the city. It was where the great tree Flagoon had once stood, but now...

"This is..." I whispered, gazing at the massive building before me.

Well, it was massive, but not in a “towering” kind of way. It was probably only one story tall. The remarkable part was its sprawling breadth. It was reminiscent of your standard temple made from gray stone or the like, but this one had been built to take up a whole city block—almost as if to fill the void left by the now-missing Flagoon.

“I heard rumors in a nearby village that it appeared out of nowhere,” Sylphiel explained.

The structure looked like it might be a perfect circle, but its most striking feature was the absence of any windows or doors—there was no apparent way in or out.

“This is the most likely location Hellmaster could be hiding both himself and Sir Gourry. Yet I couldn’t find any doors or windows, or any other way to get inside... I even used Levitation to look from above to no avail. I tried asking my father and the other people of the city about it, but their response was a uniform, ‘I cannot answer. Those who can imagine it don’t require an explanation, and for those who cannot, an explanation would do no good.’”

“I see... So they’re definitely in cahoots with Hellmaster, huh?”

“Yes. And while I was considering my next move, two days ago, Mistress Amelia and Master Zelgadis arrived in town. They spent the day examining this building, then came to stay at the temple with me. Yesterday morning, they said they were headed out to investigate a bit more... but they’ve never returned.”

“They were investigating, huh?” I said, gazing intently back at the building. “So chances are... they found a way in and that’s where they are right now.”

“Via a hidden door, you mean?”

It wasn’t uncommon to see secret doors disguised as carvings and whatnot, so it was entirely possible that Amelia and Zel had stumbled upon one such way in.

“But wouldn’t they return to let me know first?” Sylphiel whispered.

“Don’t be so sure. Amelia could tell at a glance how you felt about Gourry. She would’ve known that if you found out there was a door, no one would be able to stop you from going through it. She’d also know that the minute you found Gourry inside, you’d try to beat her and Zel to the punch. And since I’m betting she’d want to avoid all that, don’t you think it’s more likely they’d go in *without* telling you?”

“Hmm...” Sylphiel fell silent, as if stung a bit by the comment.

“Well, either way, the important thing now is to find the way in,” I said as I approached the building.

I began scrutinizing the walls, which looked like they were made completely of stone... Well, it certainly *felt* like stone, but I couldn’t tell you what kind. I’d never seen anything quite like it before. I couldn’t see any seams on the surface either. Just carved pillars here and there. I didn’t check every single one, but there didn’t seem to be anything rigged up to them.

It was... odd. If Hellmaster was waiting for me here, shouldn’t he be throwing open the gates upon my arrival? I wasn’t exactly eager for whatever qualified as his red carpet treatment, but still. The windowless, doorless building refused to yield.

Well, as the old saying goes, sometimes you just gotta make your own entrance. As a test, I began chanting a spell enhanced by the power of the talismans I’d bought from Xellos.

“Dam Blas!”

This puppy was meant to pulverize its target. It packed plenty of punch in a normal cast, but with the amplification chant on top of that, it should be capable of blasting away way more than a meager rock wall. And yet...

Splish! The Dam Blas I unleashed just crashed harmlessly against the surface without leaving so much as a scratch.

Aha... I’d seen the same phenomenon inside Rashart’s barrier in Ruald City, leading me to think we had a similar

deal going on with this building.

Well, here we go! I once again recited the amplification chant, this time in preparation for a Ragna Blade. It had made short work of Rashart's barrier before, so it seemed fair to assume it'd do the trick here. However, just as I began the chant...

Thunk. Part of the wall slid inward with a dull, heavy sound.

Ha! Good ol' Hellmaster. He'd chosen to open a door rather than see me improvise one. I canceled the spell, happy to conserve my personal magic stores, and sidled up to our newly opened door.

I couldn't see anything from where I stood. It was nothing but impenetrable darkness within, as if there was a black curtain hung just inside. While Sylphiel goggled in shock at the door's sudden appearance, I decided to step on in. Yet the moment I passed through the dark curtain... the view opened up around me.

"Huh?" I whispered as I gazed upon the familiar view of Sairaag City—completely with Sylphiel standing there staring at me. "Er..." I quickly turned and saw the same pitch-black doorway was still in the wall behind me.

"Er... what?" Sylphiel asked.

I didn't know how to answer her. I was sure I'd just gone through the door... But now here I was back outside.

"Hang on. Gimme a sec."

I turned and walked through the dark door a second time as a test. And for the second time, I found myself right in front of Sylphiel.

"Might I ask what you are doing?" she asked.

"Hmm..." I scratched my head thoughtfully. "I guess Hellmaster doesn't want me going in. Just FYI, I wasn't turning around the second I stepped inside or anything. I went in, passed through the darkness... and wound up right back here. He's probably warping space somehow or other."

"Warping space? Is such a thing possible?"

“For a certain class of demon, totally,” I said. In fact, I’d been trapped in one such warped space by a demon in Saillune City. I’d escaped that one fairly easily, but I doubted the same trick would help me here. Breaking *out* was a whole different ball game from breaking *in*. “The question is, why doesn’t Hellmaster want me going inside?”



“Could someone other than Hellmaster be in there?” Sylphiel said, proposing a truly groan-worthy possibility.

“Doubt it. Hellmaster Fibrizo said that he’d be waiting in Sairaag. Why stick anyone else here in his place?”

“Indeed,” Sylphiel whispered quietly. “His entire reason for taking Sir Gourry hostage is to make you use that spell... to see it escape your control and drown the world in darkness.”

“Yeah,” I said, nodding in agreement.

Yup. Everything pointed to that answer: the Giga Slave spell. I’d used it to destroy one of the seven pieces of Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu before, an act which may have been perceived by the other Shabranigdu known as the Dark Lord of the North, who was frozen in the Kataart Mountains. According to legend, Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu was cleaved into seven pieces and sealed away after battling Flare Dragon Ceifeed. It wasn’t a stretch to think that fragments of a formerly united entity shared memories and consciousness.

That meant he’d know all about the almighty spell that called upon the power of the Lord of Nightmares, and about the person who could wield it—that is, me. And so the Dark Lord of the North must have come up with a plan: for me to lose control of a Giga Slave and send the whole world back into a state of void.

There were just a few pesky things standing in the way. One was Chaos Dragon’s uprising. Another was my incomplete knowledge of the Lord of Nightmares. I’d once had the pleasure of witnessing a stunning feat—a certain caster had flubbed the chant and summoned Flare Arrows that looked like carrots. The Giga Slave I was throwing around was probably a lot like those Carrot Arrows compared to the real deal.

Therefore, as executor of the plan, Hellmaster had had me doing double duty: following Xellos to the Claire Bible while serving as bait for Chaos Dragon. He knew I’d be completely

at the demons' mercy and looking for a way to fight back—that I'd seek out knowledge of the Lord of Nightmares to get it. And now that I had it, he'd captured Gourry and called me to this city.

He'd also sent Rashart after me to feign attempts on my life. It was a ploy to drive me to desperation, all in hopes that I'd resort to a Giga Slave and subsequently lose control of it. I'd foiled that plan but good by pegging Rashart as the newest member of team Hellmaster... Problem was, now that I knew Hellmaster's subordinates wouldn't kill me, Fibrizo only had one recourse—and that was to use his hostage, Gourry, to threaten me directly. *"Cast the spell, or I'll kill him."*

So what was the deal? Why wouldn't he just let me in? With Rashart dead, it was hard to believe he'd try to send a new assassin—rather, a new *pretend* assassin.

"Anyhoo... I guess this means we're withdrawing for today. I don't think they'll let us in no matter how many holes we put in the wall."

"Agreed. Would you like to stay at the temple, then?"

I balked for a moment at Sylphiel's invitation, but I'd be subject to Hellmaster's whims no matter where I stayed in the city.

"Um... sure," I accepted with a nod.

I then heard the same dull, heavy sound behind me again. I turned back to see the entrance gone, leaving nothing but a clean wall of gray stone.

"You're a friend of Sylphiel's? We're so very pleased to have you."

We were now at the temple to Ceifeed tucked away in a corner of the city. Lunch was on the table, and the temple's head priest, Sylphiel's father—or at least, something made in his image—greeted me with a smile.

Hoo boy. Easy to see why Sylphiel was so tempted by the illusion...

He was a man in his early forties with a black beard. He looked like a friendly... uh, person? Well, at least appearance-wise, he seemed like a perfectly normal human. And it wasn't just him. The other priests and shrine maidens in the temple—even the statues of Flare Dragon—all seemed completely authentic.

And yet it was clear that they didn't belong here. To be frank, I still wasn't quite sure how to conduct myself around them, so I'd settled on playing it cool. It wasn't like acting cagey and hostile would get them to spill the beans. Besides, being angry and suspicious all the time was personally exhausting.

Moreover, these pawns didn't necessarily even know the whole story... Which meant my first order of business was to feel out exactly how much they *did* know.

I nodded along while the head priest made small talk, all while waiting for my chance to nonchalantly ask, "Say, Your Reverence, do you know what that building in the center of town is?"

Sylphiel shot me a silent but critical glance. Yeah, I understood how she felt. I already knew it was Hellmaster's home base, yet here I was asking the head priest about it point-blank. Personally, I just wanted to see how he reacted, but to the head priest, it probably just seemed like a spiteful question. Sylphiel was unhappy I was giving a dead ringer for her dad a hard time, but she also couldn't give *me* too much of a hard time when she knew deep down it was all a sham.

As expected, my question brought a troubled expression to the priest's face. "I'm afraid I can't answer that," he said.

"How come?" I asked casually as I popped an asparagus and smoked salmon roll into my mouth.

"Because... I was not made to answer it," he replied.

At this, Sylphiel and I both paused in our eating.

"You weren't... *made* to answer it?"

"Indeed. Just as humans were not made to breathe

underwater without magical assistance, we were not made to answer that question. Though we understand that it's a rather pathetic state of affairs..." He quietly muttered that last part with a self-effacing smile.

Wow, he... That was when it hit me. He had a self-image as a person—specifically, as the head priest of Sairaag—yet at the same time, he knew he was a duplicate created by Hellmaster.

But if Hellmaster dictated what his puppets could and couldn't do down to the smallest detail, it was obvious I wouldn't get any information out of them. Worse, putting the ol' thumbscrews on the priest would just be torment for him, as he could only reveal things that Fibrizo wanted me to know.

Hahh... I let out a deep sigh, then silently went back to my meal.

"So... what do you intend to do?" Sylphiel asked, her tired gaze on me.

It was later that afternoon. The temple had put me up in Sylphiel's room, where I was now slumped in a chair after bringing in my luggage. I stared idly out the window, enjoying the cool breeze that carried the sounds of a bustling city.

"What do you mean?" I asked, turning back to where Sylphiel stood in the doorway.

For some reason, she averted her eyes. "I said that I would save Sir Gourry... yet here I am, sitting idle. And because I failed to save him before you arrived, Hellmaster may yet threaten his life to force you to cast that forbidden spell. If he does, Lina... will you do it?"

After a period of silence, I quietly shook my head. "Dunno. If you'd asked me that before I knew what the Lord of Nightmares really was, I probably would have said, 'As long as I can keep it from going out of control.' But... if I'm perfectly honest, I don't have any confidence in my ability to

handle the perfect version.”

“Then...” Sylphiel said, her gaze plaintive.

“Nevertheless,” I interjected, shaking my head again, “one thing I *can* say for sure is that I’m not abandoning Gourry.”

“Yes... of course not,” Sylphiel whispered, then fell quiet. For a time, the only sounds in the room were the wind and the faint clamor of the city outside.

“Let’s go,” I said, breaking the silence.

“Where?”

“To that building. I want to check it out again. I doubt we’ll make it inside, but it’s better than sitting around a room racking our brains over things outside our power.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re right,” Sylphiel whispered, then smiled faintly. “Very well. Then I’ll accompany you.”

“Great. Then let’s get going,” I said with a flourish of my cape.

“What... in the world?” I whispered, staring at the building in the center of Sairaag.

“The door is open now,” Sylphiel likewise whispered, also staring in disbelief.

That’s right. When Sylphiel and I returned to the stone temple, we found the door wide open like it was waiting for us. I mean... why go to the trouble of warping space to keep us out in the morning, then bust open the vaults when we come back in the afternoon? This thing wasn’t on some kind of timer, was it?

“I wonder why it was closed earlier...” Sylphiel muttered.

“No clue. Maybe they had to get the welcome party ready,” I answered in desperation. “But we can take this as a signal that they’re ready for us now.”

“Yes... I suppose you’re right,” she said, and I heard her gulp softly. “Very well. Then... I shall accompany you.”

Yeah, go figure...

“I’m betting I can’t stop you, can I?” I asked with a wince.

"You cannot," she replied the same way.

Okay! I'm comin' in, just like you wanted, Hellmaster Fibrizo! I took a deep breath, then sallied through the door. This time, rather than being spit back outside, I entered the building normally. Sylphiel was a step behind me.

Inside was nothing more than an ordinary-looking passageway that branched out to my left and right. The walls were pale gray, just like the outside of the building, and curved slightly in both directions.

Aha... I didn't hesitate to head right.

"You know which way to go?!" Sylphiel inquired, quickly following after me.

"Nope," I responded indifferently. "But I bet we'll end up at the same place either way. The bifurcated path is probably to get us to split up, or to get us feeling anxious about the route we pick. So I say we go whichever way we want with worry-free confidence. We know Hellmaster wants me to reach him, so he wouldn't just let me wander around forever."

"I see..." she said, looking slightly nervous.

We proceeded down the dimly lit hallway. I figured it would get darker the farther in we went, but despite there being no lamps or magical lighting, it maintained the same level of brightness. Of course, there was no sign of luminescent moss on the walls either. It was more a liminal kind of lighting, like we were wandering in a place where darkness and light naturally coexisted.

After walking for a while, we eventually came across a door to our left that led further inside the building. It looked completely ordinary with no decoration whatsoever, including an utterly mundane-looking doorknob. I suspected it was made from the same material as the walls.

"I guess we're supposed to go inside," I said with a glance to Sylphiel, who nodded back.

I put my hand on the knob and slowly turned it. The door opened without a sound.

The room on the other side was strange, spacious, and round, with a kind of crystal pillar at the center. Though in terms of overall impression, it was less like a pillar and more like a mass. It stretched floor to ceiling and was thick enough to carve another whole room out of.

"What in the world...?" Sylphiel whispered, when just then, a flickering form appeared at the center of the pale blue crystal.

Is that...?!

"Sir Gourry!" Sylphiel cried out as she ran up to the pillar.

Indeed, the person hovering at the center of the crystal was unmistakably Gourry. He just floated there silently, eyes closed. It was hard to tell what condition he was in.

"Sir Gourry! Sir Gourry!" Sylphiel shouted as she pounded on the crystal.

But whether he heard her or not, Gourry didn't move.

"There's no point. It's merely a projection," a familiar voice said from inside the crystal pillar.

Gourry's image rippled, then disappeared. The following instant, it was replaced with a small figure dressed in black.

"Fibrizo!" I shouted.

"What?" Sylphiel gasped, taking a few steps back from the crystal. "This... child is..."

"Oh, I don't believe we've met before. I don't know how you know Lina Inverse, but I assume you're a 'friend' in human parlance. A pleasure to meet you. And yes, I am Hellmaster Fibrizo, one of Lord Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu's five lieutenants. I am king of this Hellpalace, and of Sairaag, City of the Dead. Our acquaintance will be brief, but I welcome you regardless," he said, finishing his absurd introduction with a bow.

"What did you do to Sairaag?! What happened to Flagoon? To the townspeople?" I demanded to know.

In response, he just smiled and said, "The tree died the instant I arrived. I believe it fed off of miasma... but it was incapable of processing the sheer quantity I put out, and so

it simply burst. Of course, that would make it impossible for most humans to approach the city, so after I recreated it, I also suppressed the miasma in the area.”

Of course... Intentionally or otherwise, he’d neutralized the miasma of the Miasma Forest.

“I then used the well left by the tree’s roots as a foundation for my Hellpalace.”

“So what are the people in the city? Illusions? Or...”

“Ah, those. I extracted the lingering thoughts of the deceased residents and gave them physical form. With various restrictions, of course.”

“Then... my father is...” Sylphiel asked hoarsely.

“Long dead, of course. What you met is more like... a marionette I created with his consciousness. Surely you realized that, didn’t you?” Fibrizo responded breezily.

If the citizens were residual thoughts given physical form, then the head priest and the woman at the stall were more or less like ghosts. In other words, Hellmaster Fibrizo had raised the City of the Dead into a true phantom city...

“That’s all pretty nasty,” I said. “And I’m sure you didn’t let us in here earlier today because of some other plan you’ve got cooking, right?”

“Naturally,” the Hellmaster in the crystal admitted readily. “Setting up all these little tricks and traps is such fun. And it feels wonderful when the victim falls for them.”

“Sucks about Rashart then, huh?”

“Ah... yes, that.” He smiled awkwardly at my quip. “I was glad to have him following my orders once Gaav was gone, though I didn’t expect him to be beaten so easily. He really was a terrible actor. Seeing his incompetence gives me a little bit more sympathy for Gaav.”

“Enough of this!” Sylphiel shouted, interrupting Hellmaster. “Where is Sir Gourry? Is he safe?!”

“Oh, that man? He’s fine—for now. He’s sealed inside a crystal I made of magic power, in a state of suspended animation. Don’t tell me you have feelings for him.”

“That’s none of your business!”

“So be it. Allow me to explain, then. He’s sealed inside the lowest section of this crystal pillar, which runs centrally through my Hellpalace as a support. You’re free to try to retrieve him—*if* you think you can. More importantly, I’ve made the conscious decision to reveal myself to you because there’s something I wanted to show you. Here.”

As he spoke, the Hellmaster in the crystal snapped his fingers. His image immediately disappeared and was replaced with a scene of two familiar figures walking down a pale gray hallway somewhere.

“Amelia! Zel!” Indeed, it was my two missing companions.

“They stopped by yesterday, so I decided to invite them in ahead of schedule,” said Hellmaster’s voice, seemingly from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to—”

“I won’t kill them, no. Not yet. But I do want to make it clear that most of what you humans are capable of can’t harm me.”

“So, what? They’ve just been wandering around the Hellpalace for a whole day?”

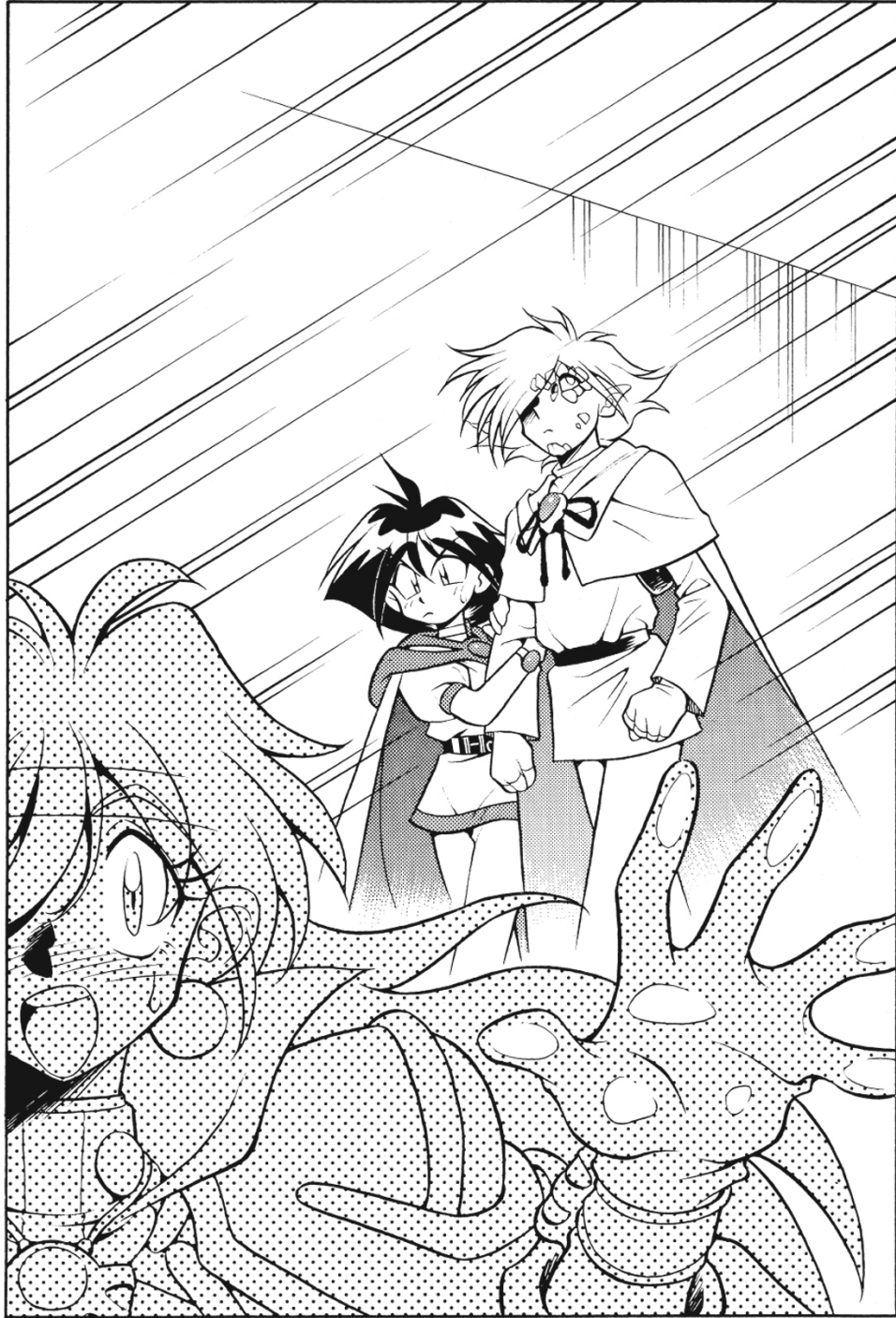
“More or less. Of course, I’m playing with time a little bit. To them, it hasn’t been long at all since they entered.”

“You’re controlling time?!” Sylphiel cried in shock.

“He’s exaggerating, I’m sure,” I responded calmly. “He’s probably scrambling their senses to slow their perception of it and tire them out.”

“Exactly right. It seemed like a pain to explain in detail, so I thought ‘playing with time’ would suffice. Regardless, however... it seems they’ve finally arrived.”

Arrived where?



Amelia and Zelgadis in the crystal came to a halt at a door. They looked at each other, and the door slowly opened on its own. After a moment's hesitation, they passed through it.

The scene in the crystal then shifted, revealing the inside of the room. I don't know how the thing worked, but it was really a clever little device.

Amelia and Zel now found themselves in a large chamber identical to the one we were in. I could see their backs come into view, and just a little ways ahead of them... stood a small figure in front of a crystal pillar that ran from floor to ceiling.

"So you've been waiting for us here... Must have been exhausting," Zel said, his voice resounding all around us.

"I wasn't waiting for *you*. But Lina Inverse just arrived, you see..."

"Lina? Already?"

"That's right. I wanted to demonstrate that no matter how you two might try, you don't stand a chance against me."

"Not so fast!" Amelia declared, boldly pointing a finger at Hellmaster. "No matter how powerful you may be, evil never prospers! As long as flames of justice burn in our hearts, your despicable plans will never come to fruition!"

"Oh... then you're righteous heroes of justice, are you?" Hellmaster asked tauntingly.

Amelia remained quiet for a second, still pointing at Fibrizo, then answered, "All of us except Lina!"

"Hey! Amelia!" I shouted at her, even knowing she couldn't hear me. I mean, I didn't think of myself as a hero either, but it still stings to hear someone say it like that!

"Ah, yes, of course," Fibrizo continued. "But you mean your human conception of righteousness, don't you? To us demons, righteousness would be returning the world to the void."

"You can't lead me astray with your trivial hair-splitting! A heart filled with justice never wavers!"

"It's far from trivial, I assure you. We all came from the same source, you see. The only difference is that you seek to continue this existence, whereas we seek the opposite—to destroy it. If you ask us demons, life is nothing but limitless contradictions. Yet in the void, void is all there is. We prefer the perfect order of nothingness to the perpetual gainsaying of existence. It's simply our nature."

"I told you I won't heed your nonsense!" Amelia declared, unmoved.

Was she refusing to listen, or did she simply not understand what Fibrizo was saying? Maybe I'd better not think about it too hard...

"Besides, if you want to destroy something so badly, why not destroy yourselves? No one would stop you!"

"You simply don't get it," Hellmaster said, sighing in response. "We don't only wish to end our own existence. Our goal is to destroy *the entire world*. But I wouldn't expect you to understand. To be fair, we find you equally inscrutable—why in the world do you want to go on existing? We just weren't made to comprehend each other."

"So... nothing to do but play this out, right?" Zelgadis muttered.

"That's right," Hellmaster replied with a nod and a big grin. "But to be honest, it doesn't seem fair to fight you here myself. If I wanted to be rid of you, I could snap you to dust before a single spell left your lips. Except that wouldn't be very fun, would it? So why don't we play a little game?"

"A game?" Amelia asked, frowning at Fibrizo's words.

"Indeed. The rules are simple. You both attack me. I'll defend, but I won't fight back. If you can beat me under those conditions, you win. If not, I win."

"That's a pretty big handicap," Zel remarked. "So? If we win, will you free Gourry?"

"That's right," Fibrizo replied. The image of Gourry flashed into the pillar behind him. "He's in suspended animation, sealed inside the crystal pillar at the very bottom

of my Hellpalace. Should you defeat me, there would naturally be no one left to stop you from taking him.”

“But if we lose, we die, right?”

“Certainly not,” Hellmaster answered, shaking his head with a smile. “If you lose, it will simply serve as proof that humans like you can never defeat me. That’s all I’m after.”

Of course... that made sense. Hellmaster’s “game” here wasn’t really meant for Amelia and Zel. It was an encoded message to me: “If you want to beat me, you’ll have to break out a Giga Slave.”

“Very well!” Amelia said, pointing meaninglessly again at Fibrizo. “I’ll make you regret that overconfidence of yours!”

You’re one to talk about overconfidence, girl...

Amelia then began chanting a spell. Zel did the same. But Fibrizo just stood there, smiling confidently.

Okay! Time for us to move too!

“Let’s get going!” I shouted.

“Very well!” Sylphiel agreed immediately.

While Fibrizo was playing with Amelia and Zel, we’d make a beeline for the basement. If we could find Gourry and save him ourselves, we’d be sitting pretty. Of course, I doubted it would be that easy, but this plan would still hopefully reunite us with our comrades, at worst.

Sylphiel and I ran around to the other side of the crystal and, surprisingly, found a stairway leading downward smack in the middle of the floor. I hadn’t expected it to be *right there*, but since the Hellpalace took whatever form Fibrizo wanted, he clearly wanted us to go downstairs. There was no way this would take us straight to Gourry. Hellmaster probably intended to lead us to his fight with the others so we could witness his power for ourselves.

Okay! Let’s go, then! Sylphiel and I looked at each other and nodded, then started to descend... down the staircase that would take us to Fibrizo.

4: Thou Who Art Blacker Than Darkness, Than Night

According to legend, our world is like a plate sitting atop a staff thrust into the Sea of Chaos. I've always assumed that was wrong, but what I learned from the Claire Bible changed my thinking a little. The old story is, in a sense, half correct.

"Ra Tilt!" Amelia's voice echoed.

The room that Sylphiel and I found at the bottom of the stairs was similar, structurally, to the one above it. It was another large chamber dominated by a crystal pillar skewering its center from top to bottom. Said pillar was also showing the battle—no, the game—that Amelia and Zel were locked in with Fibrizo. We could still hear their voices and everything.

That's how I knew Amelia's Ra Tilt hadn't activated.

"What?!" she gasped with a shocked expression.

Fibrizo smiled and calmly explained, "I don't even need to speak a word to block such a meager spell. I can neutralize its power before it activates with a single thought."

That was incredible. Even Chaos Dragon Gaav had required a vocalization to neutralize our magic.

"Ra Tilt!" Zel cast the same spell on the heels of Amelia's.

It seemed the only way to nail Fibrizo would be to catch him by surprise. But under the circumstances, it was impossible for Amelia and Zel to do that.

So what if I burst into the room with a spell ready to go? In order to do that, though, I'd actually have to get there first...

We had to hurry. Sylphiel and I ran around the central

crystal pillar and descended another staircase opening in the floor.

The legend hails, "Lord of Nightmares, dark lord of dark lords. Driven from heaven, adrift in the Sea of Chaos." That's what one of the old prophets told my sister when we were visiting the palace in Dils, but it's not right. Maybe the Claire Bible manuscript he got his knowledge from was incomplete, or maybe he just interpreted it wrong... I don't know.

Descending the staircase, Sylphiel and I once again found ourselves in a similar room. I wondered for a moment if Fibrizo had warped space around the stairs like he had at the entrance, forcing us to walk the same steps over and over again... Still, one way or another, our only option now was to keep going down.

While we were doing that, Amelia and Zel continued to attack Fibrizo. He'd easily nullified their Ra Tilts, so they were trying various other spells.

"Elemekia Lance!"

"Goz Vu Row!"

But Fibrizo lightly batted aside Amelia's spear of light, then stomped out the black shadow Zel sent running across the floor. It was now painfully obvious this dude was on a whole other level. Despair began to show on Amelia's and Zel's faces, just like Hellmaster wanted.

"Fireball!"

Knowing it was useless, or perhaps maddened by desperation, Amelia threw a Fireball. Such a spell wasn't a threat to any demon, so Hellmaster just smirked at her without even trying to evade or block it.

Bwoosh! Amelia's Fireball scattered flames all around Fibrizo. As it did...

"Ra Tilt!" Zelgadis unleashed his spell, but his voice echoed emptily in the room as the spell failed to activate once more.

The smoke soon cleared from the Fireball, revealing a

perfectly unharmed Hellmaster Fibrizo. “I wonder,” he said, still wearing the same smarmy smirk. “Was that Fireball intended to be a distraction? A bit obvious, don’t you agree?”

“Ngh... In that case...” Zel drew the broadsword from his back and began chanting a spell. “Astral Vine!”

He then charged at Fibrizo with his now magically infused blade. *Vrmm!* It sliced through the air, and Fibrizo didn’t even try to dodge. Zel’s sword came down, cutting right through Hellmaster Fibrizo from stem to stern!

No—wait! It actually *passed* right through him!

I should have seen this coming. Fibrizo was a fundamentally incorporeal being to begin with; he’d just given himself physical form somehow. Then wasn’t it possible for him to simply tone down the degree of his manifestation?

“What now?” Fibrizo taunted without batting an eye.

Zelgadis was at a loss for words. Amelia, undeterred, kept chanting, but I could plainly see the desperation on her face.

Fibrizo said that we all come from the same source. If that’s true...

Fibrizo’s game seemed to be nearing its end. Neither Amelia nor Zel could have much magic power left. They’d burned through all their attack options without striking a decisive blow against Hellmaster—in fact, without striking a blow at all. They were forced to fall back on another set of Ra Tilts, but instead of unleashing them instantly, they simply stared down Fibrizo while hopelessly waiting for the chance to catch him off guard.

There was only one way to turn the tables—if we joined the fray.

Meanwhile, Sylphiel and I had at last come out into a different area. We’d been through identical room after identical room... I didn’t know for how long, but I was glad to finally reach a room without another staircase.

We exited into a corridor that we followed, hoping it

would lead us to Amelia and Zel. At the end were yet more stairs leading down, but since the structure of this area was different, I figured we *had* to be getting close. And if my gut was right, this would be our chance to jump in and catch Hellmaster by surprise! As I ran down the next corridor, I began reciting a Dragon Slave.

And eventually, after a while...

Aha! At the end of the hallway, we spotted a wide-open door. On the other side, I could see two familiar figures facing off against a childlike figure.

Yes! We made it! We picked up the pace and burst onto the scene. The second Hellmaster glanced our way, I released the spell I'd been chanting!

"Dragon Slave!"

And yet... it didn't activate. Had he seen through me?!

"I predicted even that!" he proclaimed triumphantly—a moment too soon.

"Dragon Slave!" someone else incanted.

"Sylphiel!" I yelped.

"What?!" Hellmaster cried in the same breath.

He must not have anticipated an attack from Sylphiel, because he didn't have time to neutralize her Dragon Slave before he was awash with crimson light.

"Gwaaah!" he screamed, his whole body trembling. He clearly meant to resist the Dragon Slave with his spiritual power alone, but...

"Ra Tilt!" Not missing this chance, Amelia and Zel both spoke words of power.

Fwoosh! This time, their spells manifested without a problem, and the blue... No, the white flames of their Ra Tilts enveloped Hellmaster Fibrizo! Why the different color, though? Was the double Ra Tilt resonating with the Dragon Slave?!

"Raaaaaaaaaagh!" Fibrizo's bestial howl shook the air around us. Within moments, he was reduced to a black shadow that blew apart within the white pillar of the three

mixed spells. And when the pillar itself disappeared... Hellmaster Fibrizo was no more.

"Did... we manage it?" Zelgadis whispered after a long silence.

"I don't know," Sylphiel whispered back, carefully scanning around her.

I didn't sense anything nearby myself, but...

"What's that?!" Amelia cried.

I followed her gaze to a hazy form blurring into existence inside the crystal pillar that held up the Hellpalace.

Fibrizo?!

We all took fighting stances again and began chanting a fresh set of spells as the form gradually became more distinct.

Wait, is that...

"Sir Gourry?!" Sylphiel cried out.

Indeed, it was Gourry phasing into being inside the crystal. Then slowly, as if being pushed, his body emerged from it.

"Gourry!" I shouted, but before I could make it over to him...

Sylphiel was already there to catch him and hold him up.

Ah... I slowed to a halt with a faint pang in my chest. "Is he... okay?" I asked, and Sylphiel nodded without turning back.

Good... he's okay. A sigh of relief escaped my lips.



"Sir Gourry! Sir Gourry!" Sylphiel continued to call.

"Urgh..." he eventually groaned in response.

Thankfully he looked like he was still in pretty decent shape. But if he was really okay, then...

"Where... am I?" he asked, shaking his head lightly before looking around. Seemed he was fully conscious now.

I took that as my cue.

"Don't 'where am I' me!!!" I shouted, nailing him dead in the chest with a jump kick.

"M-Mistress Lina?!"

"What was that for?!"

I ignored Sylphiel's and Gourry's objections. Now that I knew Gourry was fine, all my pent-up irritation came flooding back.

"I swear! You had us freaking out, man! I know we're dealing with Hellmaster Fibrizo here, but how could you let him make off with you so easily?! Are you going for a fairy tale princess look or something?!"

"Huh? Hang on a minute!"

"Anyway, everyone's safe, so crisis averted!" I declared, turning away from Gourry. "You should really thank Sylphiel! I doubt we could've saved you without her!"

"Huh?" Gourry said uncertainly.

I had my back to him, so I couldn't see his expression... Maybe I didn't want to.

"Sir Gourry..." Sylphiel called, her voice quavering. "I'm so glad you're safe."

He looked stupefied for a good minute, then clapped his hands together in realization. "Oh, that's right! I got captured!"

"How could you forget that?!" we all shouted at him in unison.

Stupid jerk couldn't even remember what he'd gotten his own damned self into... But, hey, I guess that's Gourry for you!

"So... where is he, anyway?" the big lug asked, causing

the rest of us to exchange glances.

"The fact that Sir Gourry was released means we must have defeated him, but..."

"Of course we did! We vanquished evil with the justice in our hearts!"

"But... was that really enough to beat someone like him?" I had to ask, casting both the pensive Sylphiel and the triumphant Amelia into silence.

"Well, one thing we can say for sure," Zel piped up, "is that there's no point in hanging around here any longer. We've saved Gourry."

"Agreed," replied Sylphiel with a nod.

"No argument here!" Amelia added.

"I still dunno what's going on, but..." Gourry chimed in.

"Argh! Just come along and I'll catch you up later!" I shouted. "Okay, everyone, let's blow this joint! Exit's this way!"

With that, I left the room with Zel, Amelia, Gourry, and Sylphiel in tow in that order. We came out into the gray corridor I'd entered from and found the staircase up easily enough. As we were climbing, something important occurred to me.

"By the way, Gourry, the Sword of Light, er, Gorun Nova... What happened to it?"

"I, uh... don't really know."

Yeah, I had a feeling that would be his answer.

"Those black tentacles that came out of it got me, and the next thing I knew, I was inside this building here," he explained. "Then when the tentacles disappeared, I was surrounded by this weird blue mist... and I only woke up again just now."

Ah, okay. Hellmaster had said Gorun Nova was a demonic entity from another world, meaning he'd probably sent it back whence it came. Besides, even if we still had our hands on it, I'd be hesitant to use it now that I knew it was demonic in nature. It was hard to believe I'd wielded it so carelessly

and comfortably beforehand... But it was apparently just gone now, so the point was moot.

As I turned all this over, I approached the top of the steps.

"That's right... I did forget about Gorun Nova," a familiar voice greeted me.

I gasped. We should have hit another corridor at the top of the stairs, but instead, I found myself coming out into a large, circular, pale gray room—complete with a large crystal pillar in the center. And standing before it was none other than...

"I knew you were still around, Hellmaster Fibrizo!"

The demon in the form of a little boy smiled confidently. He hadn't been defeated after all... although I'd expected as much, of course. Shouting his name was mostly a heads-up to the others still on the stairs. Or, at least, that was the idea...

"Huh?!"

But then I realized I could no longer sense their presences behind me. I quickly turned back only to see an empty staircase.

"Just a little spatial distortion. I wanted you to come alone, Lina Inverse," Fibrizo said, then snapped his fingers with his right hand. The crystal pillar in the middle of the room glowed faintly, showing Gourry and the others in a gray hallway, looking around in confusion. "I fiddled a bit with the space at the top of the stairs to make sure you arrived unaccompanied. Your friends are searching for you at this very moment... though no matter how they might struggle, they'll never find you here."

"Okay, I'll bite. Where *am* I?"

Fibrizo smiled cheerfully in response as he explained, "This is the lowest point of the Hellpalace. The room where we fought is five floors above us. I'll admit you really took me by surprise there... I never expected a Dragon Slave out of that girl."

"I didn't know that Sylphiel could use it either."

"I saved myself by leaving a portion of my spiritual form behind as a decoy while I retreated... If I hadn't, that might have hurt a little more. As a reward for you mere humans impressing me so much, I decided to release that Gourry fellow you're so fond of."

"How kind of you," I said sarcastically.

But Fibrizo ignored me and continued, "Yet you seemed to have realized that I was unharmed."

"It did occur to me, yeah. This place is tied to your will, and it was suspiciously unaffected by your apparent demise. And even though we caught you off guard, the idea that a couple of spells would be all it took to finish you off seemed a little too good to be true."

"Indeed. Though you're impressive for a group of humans, that's still all you are. Oh, I know... What you said earlier reminded me." The space in front of Fibrizo's chest rippled slightly, and the Sword of Light—rather, Gorun Nova—appeared out of thin air. "I really should return this to Dark Star."

With that, Fibrizo closed his eyes and began whispering something like a chant under his breath. Not long after...

VrrreeeeeeEEEE! There came a high, clear sound like vibrating metal that gradually grew louder. It shook the very air around us and penetrated deep into my head, making my eardrums pound.

And then suddenly, I couldn't hear it anymore. It hadn't gone away, though. I could tell because I still felt the air around me trembling. The sound had just risen to a level imperceptible to my human ears.

I watched as Gorun Nova turned black and, like ink washed away in a stream, flowed out of Hellmaster's hands and dissipated. When it did, the sound—rather, the vibration—stopped altogether.

"That should do it." He opened his eyes again and smiled brightly at me. "It's back where it belongs, so let's move on. We've had a slight change in our agenda, but no matter.

Shall we move to the main event?"

With a glance at the four figures in the crystal pillar, Fibrizo snapped his fingers again.

Whoooooosh! A blue mist abruptly appeared at their feet. They all cried out in surprise as it rose up to envelop them, and... *Click!* The next instant, all four of them were encased inside the blue crystal.

"Guys?!" I shouted in shock.

Hellmaster had probably sealed them the same way he had Gourry. That meant that there were only two ways to get them back—either Fibrizo had to let them go, or I had to kill him.

"What will you do now, Lina Inverse?" he asked me with an inappropriately cheerful grin. "I could kill all four of them whenever I so please. I just have to crack the crystal a little bit."

"Ngh..." I glared straight at Fibrizo. A bead of sweat ran down my cheek.

"You're the only one who can stop me," he said tauntingly. "And there's only one way to do it. You have to defeat me. But I think you know that standard spells won't harm me in the slightest, and if you conjure that black blade you used against Gaav, I'll simply fly up out of your reach. It did look rather painful, after all."

After a brief silence, I let out a big sigh.

"Fine, I get it. If you want a Giga Slave, I'll *give* you a Giga Slave!"

"Oho?" The corners of Fibrizo's mouth curled upward. "You knew what I wanted from you?"

"Of course I did. You weren't exactly subtle about it," I replied. "But why bother strong-arming *me*? Can't you just cast the spell yourself and let it run wild? You're going to die when the world does either way."

"If only I could," Fibrizo said with a bitter smile. "Unlike the lesser demons and brass demons that manifest in this world through the possession of animals, pure demons such

as I are essentially beings of unalloyed spirit. Chanting a spell that borrows power from another being would be a refutation of our own power—an act akin to suicide for us. Invoking a shamanistic spell to serve some immediate goal wouldn't be so bad, but spells that borrow from other high-ranking demons—let alone *that one*—might destroy us before we even finish the chant. And so I chose a human with no such limitations, and no idea of how terrifying that spell really is. But, ah, enough talk. Get to it, won't you? Or must I shatter your allies first, one by one?"

"Fine..."

But would this work on Hellmaster Fibrizo? I first recited the amplification chant to draw power out of my talismans, then began to speak the chaos words that governed the laws of magic.

*Thou who art blacker than darkness
Thou who art deeper than the night
Hear me, golden lord of darkness
Adrift upon the Sea of Chaos*

"What?!" Hellmaster Fibrizo's voice took on a note of panic as he heard the chant drifting from my lips. "What are you doing?!"

Yup. This was the *incomplete* version of Giga Slave. With the power of the talismans helping me, I could probably control it. And if I could finish Fibrizo with this, it would all be over!

*I call to thee, I ask this boon
And to thee I offer this pledge:
So all those in equal measure—
Fools that they are to block our path—
Shall face destruction unconstrained
Grant me power, and unleash thine!*

Vrumm! A dark mist appeared around me, causing the very air around it to creak from strain. It then began to accumulate in my extended left hand, sometimes warping, sometimes swelling, its power desperately trying to escape

my control... but I held it fast in place.

Even with the power of the talismans on my side, the depletion I felt was intense. Just holding the invoked power in place seemed to sap my very life energy, and I could feel both my magic and stamina rushing out of my body.

"You...!" With a gasp of uncertainty, Hellmaster took a fearful step back.

But the power I borrowed from the Lord of Nightmares was already ready!

"Giga Slave!"

The ball of darkness in my palm contracted, then disappeared. The next instant, it teleported inside of its target and exploded its emptiness outward!

"Graaagh!" Hellmaster's scream echoed all around us. Dark flame burst from his body and formed a pillar around him!

Graaaaaaaaaah!

The howling shook the Hellpalace. Was it the air itself shattering, or Fibrizo's cry? I fell to one knee, shoulders slumped, my magical and physical power near spent. I could see that my hair had turned silver, a phenomenon that occurred when a person exhausted too much life energy. A powerful drowsiness overtook me.

But I couldn't afford to lose consciousness yet! Not until I was sure the spell had worked. I watched as the pillar of black flame disappeared... and Hellmaster with it.

Still, something was wrong. The pillar of darkness should have ruptured and kept going, bathing the whole area behind the target in pure destruction. The first time I'd ever used the spell, I'd carved a new inlet on the beach. The fact that this casting went out with just the pillar of black flame suggested something had contained its power. Of course, that something was none other than...

"Very clever of you, Lina Inverse... I wasn't expecting that at all. Just mitigating the damage proved very painful." As his voice spoke, a gray something—like shadow, like mist—

oozed out of the floor and took the form of Hellmaster Fibrizo once more.

Damn it! I knew it!

"Hrgh..." On my knees and heaving for breath, I gazed up at Fibrizo. He'd probably used the same trick he had against Amelia—leaving part of his astral form as bait for the spell, while his true self worked to mitigate its power.

"You did cast the spell, if only the incomplete version..." Hellmaster glared at me vehemently for a second, then turned his gaze to the projection in the crystal pillar. "But that's not what I wanted. Besides, I never said I'd spare your comrades if you cast it either way."

"What?!"

"It's time for some payback. I'll shatter... well, not all of them, but one of them to start."

Erk... Not good!

"Who should it be? Let's see... how about that man I was going to start with anyway?" Fibrizo's eyes zeroed in on Gourry inside the crystal.

"Stop it!" the scream rushed from my mouth. But Fibrizo just cast a small smile in my direction.

Gourry... He's going to kill Gourry!

There was only one way to stop Fibrizo! I got to work the split second the thought entered my mind. I recited the amplification chant again, then the chaos words.

Thou who art blacker than darkness...

I drew out every last bit of power I had left as I spoke, shakily rising to my feet. When he heard my incantation, Hellmaster turned a cool gaze my way.

"Trying the same trick again, are we? If you think that will slay me, you're sadly mistaken."

Regardless, I continued chanting.

Thou who art deeper than the night...

I didn't care about Hellmaster's plan, or the chance that this spell might go berserk. I just wanted to save Gourry, my slime-brained self-proclaimed guardian.

Hear me, golden lord of darkness

The Sea of Chaos, vast, adrift

"Oh?!" Hellmaster cried out in joy and surprise.

I had once heard that the Lord of Nightmares was the greatest of all dark lords, cast from heaven into the Sea of Chaos. But that was wrong. I'd learned as much from the Claire Bible. The primordial Sea of Chaos that drifted beneath all the many worlds of our universe... *was* the Lord of Nightmares.

The legends described worlds as sitting atop staffs planted in the Sea of Chaos, but there was a different way to look at it: the Sea of Chaos was the very foundation of everything.

I call to thee, I ask this boon

And to thee I offer this pledge:

So all those in equal measure—

Fools that they are to block our path—

Shall face destruction unconstrained

Grant me power, and unleash thine!

Once again, darkness... No, void manifested. Perhaps it was chaos itself? At any rate, a black *something* beyond human comprehension finally, slowly, began to coalesce in my extended left hand. As it did, vigor drained rapidly from my body. It wasn't magic or stamina that I was exhausting this time; it was pure life energy. I could feel my very soul being hollowed out and sucked away, swallowed up by that endless void. Every cell in my body screamed from the pressure.

But I couldn't afford to pass out. I couldn't let this spell go out of control. If I did... then, just as Sylphiel had warned, just as Hellmaster Fibrizo had planned, the world really would truly be returned to the primeval void.

Tha-thump!

I felt a tremble pass through me. It was almost audible. The darkness continued to eat away at my willpower, little by little, even as I struggled to keep the spell under control.

The darkness in my left hand continued its irregular pulsing, and slowly but surely grew larger.

Can't... let it... go berserk...

I gritted my teeth. Hard. The sight of the glowering Fibrizo and everything else around me began to flicker and go dim.

Tha-thump!

The darkness expanded. Into my soul.

I can't control it!

Just as that thought entered my mind, my consciousness plunged into darkness.

And then...

I slowly opened my eyes. A spot of darkness about the size of my fist hovered stably over my extended left hand. Further beyond it I could see Hellmaster Fibrizo, in his borrowed childlike form, standing there smiling.

Oh... You kept it under control. Very impressive, his voice echoed in my head. There was no panic or surprise there. But I hope you don't think this means you've beaten me. To be honest, I had a feeling you might be able to pull it off. You have those Demon Blood talismans, after all. And so I actually prepared a little trick for you, just in case.

For a moment, an image of Sairaag City drifted through my mind in time with his words.

I haven't yet explained why I wouldn't let you enter my Hellpalace this morning, have I? I told you before that I created this city out of lingering thoughts given form, but I never told you what material that form was made from—it was me. Everything in this city is made from myself. In other words... I am Sairaag City.

"And?" I replied calmly to Hellmaster's sly tone.

"And"?! There was a flash of hatred in his smile, as if he found this response displeasing. You don't get it, do you? Then allow me to explain! Any food you ate here... Do you know what it really was?! Yes! It too was a part of me! In other words, my essence is inside of you right now!

“And?”

You still don't understand?! Fibrizo's "voice" shouted in irritation. Then let me make it clear! Maybe I can't attack you from without while you have control of that void. But as long as part of me exists inside you, I can use that to destroy you from within! With but a single thought, I can rupture your heart! And once I've killed you, there'll be nothing left to hold back the darkness!

“Heh.” I let out a derisive snort at Hellmaster, who still gravely misunderstood the situation.

This clearly irritated him.

If that's how you want to play it, fine! I will kill you! I'll tear you asunder!

For an instant, Fibrizo's power flooded my body... and burst.

“Impossible!” This cry of shock came from Hellmaster. He took a few timid steps back, staring at me as I stood there unharmed. “It can't be! Your heart exploded! You should be dead! How... How are you still alive?!” I watched on calmly as Fibrizo lost his mind. “How could you... How could you *come back to life?!"*

Indeed, Hellmaster's power had sundered my body just now. It had, in fact, killed me. But...

“What's so strange?” I asked.

“What—” Hearing my voice caused Hellmaster to go silent. “A-Ah... Ahhhhh!” Then, with a shriek of horror, he crumpled to the floor. It seemed he'd finally realized who / was.

I must admit, failing to recognize me and then mounting that ridiculous attack... There are some degrees of banality I simply cannot abide.

“It... It can't be!” Fibrizo's voice trembled as I raised the void in my hand aloft.

“I grant you destruction, Hellmaster Fibrizo. The selfsame destruction you so desired.”

The now-golden hair of the human who formed my core—the girl known as Lina Inverse—rustled in a nonexistent wind. With my left hand, I effortlessly crushed the void. It blinked through space in that moment and entered Fibrizo's body.

He let out a scream, and I perceived him leave a spiritual shell for the void before withdrawing his true essence to the astral plane. His favorite trick, like a lizard dropping its tail. But it wouldn't work. I used the void as a mediator to send my will into the astral plane after Fibrizo. In time, I found him there, where he insisted on resisting me violently.

If you seek destruction, then abide my will!

But my call only increased his desperate struggling. He was confused, out of his mind in terror of me.



As Fibrizo continued to fight, my tentacles of void found their way inside him. Normally, I could have easily devoured such a puny being. But perhaps because of the human vessel I was using, I couldn't invoke all of my power at once.

Yet I wasn't about to let Fibrizo go. Even if it was a simple case of mistaken identity, he'd still attacked me.

Begone!

My will exploded. The void ate away the Hellpalace, then the city of Sairaag, as if seeking to root itself in the ground below. And with that...

Hellmaster Fibrizo's soul ruptured as he let out one final cry.

I opened my eyes to blue sky above. I blinked, once, twice...

Wha?!

I sat bolt upright. I? Yes, I, Lina Inverse.

"Huh..."

Briefly not comprehending my current situation, I scanned the area around me. I was sitting at the bottom of what looked like a deep hole. Gourry, Zel, Amelia, and Sylphiel were all lying unconscious nearby.

We were no longer inside the Hellpalace. It had been constructed of Hellmaster's own being, so when he expired, so too did it and the city of Sairaag.

When I looked at my hair, I realized it was back to its naturally beautiful auburn hue.

Oh... right. With that, I finally recalled what had happened.

I glanced around me again, and this time took notice of a dark figure standing not too far off. He was looking at me with a strange sort of calm.

"Guess you didn't get what you wanted, Xellos. Too bad, huh?"

This was the first I'd seen him since Chaos Dragon Gaav had dismembered him at Dragons' Peak. He must have just

teleported here. He seemed to have his arm back now—but who knew how much damage demons like him were capable of bouncing back from?

To my greeting, the black-clad Priest of the Beast replied with his ever-present affable smile, “Too bad for whom? Really, it’s not as if I failed in any way.”

“So you’re cool as long as it’s not you on the chopping block?” I asked sarcastically.

“Well, I *am* a demon,” he responded with a grin (natch).

“But if you’ve washed your hands, then what are you doing here now? Don’t tell me you want to avenge Fibrizo or something noble like that.”

“I would never dream of doing something so utterly nonsensical. It’s just... to be perfectly honest, I have no idea what had happened back there. It certainly didn’t look to me like you had control of the spell. So to satisfy my own curiosity, I’d like to hear it from the horse’s mouth, so to speak.”

“You really expect me to explain it to you?”

“Certainly not,” he said, shaking his head. “But I always have to ask, even if it’s futile.”

The sheer Xellosness of that response brought a faint smile to my face. “It was actually pretty stupid, on both their parts. A real parade of human error.”

“*Human* error?”

“Just a manner of speaking... What I’m trying to say is that I don’t feel like I won so much as I feel like I *survived*.”

“Oho...”

“I cast the perfected Giga Slave. And I totally failed to control it. Thing is, I didn’t actually know what the spell would do... As it turns out, Hellmaster didn’t either. Apparently the caster becomes a vessel for the Lord of Nightmares.” My casual use of that name caused Xellos to grimace slightly, but I ignored him and kept talking. “It’s like my consciousness was... fused with it, or consumed by it. Whatever the case, while I remember what transpired, I’m

not totally sure of the forces at work. Unfortunately for Hellmaster, he didn't realize who he was dealing with and attacked me while I was like that. The Lord of Nightmares didn't like it and fought back. Fibrizo didn't know how to handle something he believed to be his ally retaliating against him, so he fought back out of desperation and confusion."

Hellmaster's panic had stemmed from the presumption that the Lord of Nightmares was on his side in the first place. That was his real fatal mistake.

Void, chaos, whatever you want to call it... We tend to think of it as an inherently demonic thing. But if, as Fibrizo said, both the demons who seek destruction and the creatures who seek existence came from the same source—in other words, from *it*—then the Lord of Nightmares held sovereignty not just over demons, but over us as well.

And, I mean... even if it was kind of an accident, anyone would fight back after being attacked like that.

"So the Lord of Nightmares got more and more annoyed, and finally decided to go all-out on Hellmaster. As for what happened next, I think it exceeds human understanding, so I can't really say, but... I think under normal circumstances, the Lord of Nightmares would have been overwhelmingly stronger than Fibrizo. But since it was channeling through me, a human vessel, it couldn't bring all its power to bear. It was just so annoyed with Fibrizo that it ignored all that and kept pursuing him. So they went at each other and," I said, opening both my hands at around shoulder height, "both went poof."

Once the Lord of Nightmares had expended its power, it lost its ability to control me. That forced it out of my body and back to the... void? Chaos? Whatever you want to call it.

"I see... So it was their so-called human error that allowed you to survive. Very stupid indeed. Hahaha," Xellos said with utter unconcern.

I had to wonder if, at heart, he'd ever really approved of

Fibrizo's plan.

"I see. I'm satisfied now," Xellos said, turning his back to me.

"Leaving already?"

"Yes. I have no more business here, after all. Unless..."

Still facing away, he asked in the same breezy tone as always, "You're not going to say something like 'But you still need to pay' or 'I can't let you go after everything you've done,' are you?"

I shrugged. "Nah, holding that kind of grudge is just exhausting. I mean, we could fight right here and now, but if I lost, I'd lose big... And if I won, it wouldn't net me anything but bragging rights. Of course, there may come a day when the world is on the line... but we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

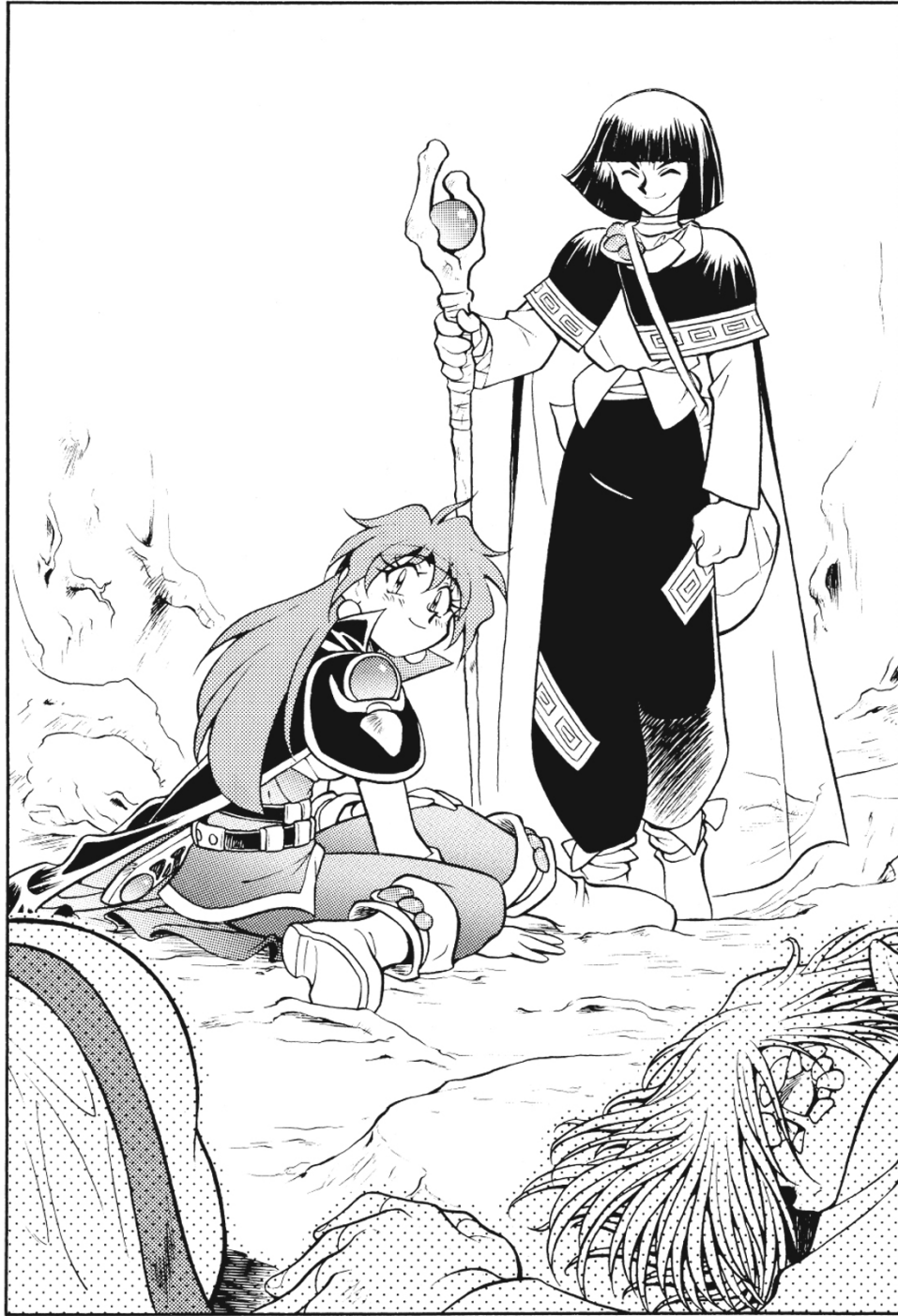
"I see." He looked back over his shoulder with a smile. "I really should be taking my leave, then. I pray we never see each other more, Miss Lina. If we do, I'll be acting as a servant of Lord Greater Beast, and so..."

"When we do cross paths, it'll be as enemies... or at least in some other kind of kill-each-other capacity, right?"

Xellos slowly turned away once more.

"So long, Xellos," I said. "May we never meet again."

And with those parting words, Xellos flickered and vanished into thin air.



“Ngh...” As if cued by Xellos’s disappearance, I heard a groan from nearby.

I looked over and saw Sylphiel sitting up, shaking her head lightly. My other three companions regained consciousness moments later. It was pretty perfect timing. If Zel or Amelia had caught sight of Xellos, things would’ve gotten a lot touchier. Perhaps Xellos had *kept* them from waking up until we’d finished talking.

Everyone except Gourry was holding their stomach, looking a bit nauseous. Of course, like me, they’d ingested some of Fibrizo’s essence. But *it* had also consumed every bit of Fibrizo during the battle, leaving their guts in an awkward state.

Regardless, they were all safe. They sat up and looked around in confusion, until at last their eyes fell on me.

“Mistress... Lina?” Sylphiel said, still looking a bit woozy.

“Oh. Hey there,” I said with a wave.

“What happened?” Zel asked, looking around.

“Ah, well, when Hellmaster died, both the Hellpalace and the Sairaag he’d created disappeared too. I’m guessing we’re where the Hellpalace used to be... probably in the hole left by Flagoon’s roots,” I responded, intentionally vague on the details.

“Hellmaster Fibrizo... is dead?” Sylphiel whispered, looking at me in shock. “Does that mean... Mistress Lina, did you use that spell?!”

“Erk! Well, I...” Sylphiel had sworn me never to cast it again. “But if I hadn’t, you guys would’ve... y’know...” I averted my gaze and fell quiet.

“The point remains!” Breaking the silence, Amelia struck a daring pose. “Our justice-loving hearts foiled the wicked designs of Hellmaster!”

“We barely did anything, though,” Zel piped in snidely.

“Yet justice was upheld!” she reasserted, ignoring him.

Watching Amelia, Sylphiel let out a slightly pained sigh. “Well, I suppose... It does appear you kept the spell under

control, at least.”

Double erk...

“Y-Yep, sure did! Well, I doubt I’ll ever have cause to cast it again anyway... Ahahahahaha!” I laughed dryly as sweat rolled down my cheeks.

I sure as hell *hadn’t* kept it under control. I’d basically stumbled into a positive outcome by chance by happy chance... But let’s just pretend I had a handle on it all, mmkay?

“That’s all well and good, but...” Gourry said, his voice as carefree as ever. “Uh, can we get out of here already? The bottom of a hole isn’t the best place for a chat.”

“Good point.” I nodded firmly and began to cast a Levitation spell.

Wind rushed over Sairaag, now empty once more. But as desolate as it was, wildflowers bloomed here and there, telling us that there was yet life in the ground.

“I feel quite... cleansed,” Sylphiel whispered, a forlorn smile on her face. She took in and released a deep breath. “So, what are you all going to do next?”

“It’s back to Saillune for me!” Amelia announced with truly inexplicable intensity. “One source of evil has been vanquished, and justice has prevailed! I must let it be known!” she continued, pointing in a random direction.

If, by some twist of fate, she ended up on the throne, Saillune could become a terrifying country indeed. I hoped her big sister, Gracia, had a few more marbles.

“I think... I’ll probably go back to wandering,” Zelgadis said, gazing into the distance. He was still on a quest to regain his humanity. A quest that likely had no end.

“Er... so...” Sylphiel said, squirming a bit. “What about you, Sir Gourry?”

“Huh? Me?” He looked in my direction. “What *are* we doing next?”

“W-Wait, why are you asking me?!”

"I didn't know what else to do."

"I see," Sylphiel said with a small sigh, seeming to derive some meaning from his statement. Then, as if purging herself of something, she said, "I shall return to Saillune to rejoin my uncle. I'm his assistant now, but I'm slowly getting my own qualifications... And some day, I shall return to Sairaag to restore it."

"Good luck," I said. She smiled brightly in response.

Now, what about me?

I could return to Zephilia and see the old gang again, or I could keep traveling a while longer. As I was pondering the possibilities...

"Say, Lina, what ever happened to my Sword of Light?"

"Oh, that? Hellmaster said he was returning it to its original owner, so I guess he sent it back to some other world."

"Huh..." Gourry stared into the distance, seeming unusually pensive by doofus standards.

It was true that without his demon-slaying Sword of Light, he was just an ordinary master swordsman. Hmm...

"Okay! I got it!" I said, clapping my hands together. "Let's find you a replacement for the Sword of Light!"

"Whaaat?!" Gourry shouted in surprise. "Lina! Did... Did you just offer to do something *nice?!'*"

"What's that supposed to mean?! Look, Hellmaster only got his hands on the Sword of Light because he was after me in the first place. And no normal sword is going to replace it, so..."

"But are magic swords really that easy to come by?"

"Eh, no worries," I said, waving my hand reassuringly.

The Bless Blade that grew with Flagoon had probably been lost with the tree itself, but there were other legendary swords out there. There was the Blast Sword, the Red Dragon Sword, and the Elemekia Blade, just to name a few. Of course, there were plenty of fakes too.

"Fancy blades like that aren't too uncommon. You just

gotta look for 'em. I found a few unnamed magical swords on my journey before I met you. Even sent one back home to my sister as a souvenir. If we find a good one, I'll also be able to use it for magical research, so it's a win-win situation."

"Okay! Sounds like we're sticking together until we find me a sword, then. You're not gonna make off with my purse while we're on the road, are you?"

"No, darn it!"

"Good! Then let's get going!"

"Where to?"

"I don't know! I'm not the brains of this operation!"

"At least *try* thinking!" I smacked Gourry in the back of the head.

And so we all went our separate ways down the roads ahead of us, leaving the phantom City of the Dead behind.

Afterword

Scene: The Author and L

Au: The reprint of *Slayers, Volume 8: King of the Phantom City* thus marks the end of the first major novel arc!

L: Several long-running threads are wrapped up here! And I finally get a little time to shine!

Au: Time to shine? Pretty sure this is the volume that got you a reputation as a klutz...

L: I'm not a klutz! I just... I wasn't thinking!

Au: Wait, hang on. We're getting into spoiler territory here.

L: Spoiler territory?! Why are you worried about spoilers in the afterword of a reprint?! You were the one already talking about Zuma in the afterword of volume 3 before he even showed up.

Au: We should still avoid anything too revealing about the story at hand.

L: Mmgh. Not sure I agree on that, but... If only I'd been a little more careful, I would've been the hero of the next arc! I'd hear about delicious fare in the west and go eat my heart out. I'd catch wind of a high-ranked demon to the east and go sponge off them. I'd visit the dragons to the south and get them to hold some kind of banquet. And I'd demand that the golden dragon elder to the north stop telling those terrible jokes! A magnificent tour de force!

Au: Um, I don't think anyone wants to read a story like that.

L: Lies! It would be wildly popular and get a Hollywood adaptation directed by George A. R*m*ro!

Au: *That's* the direction you want it to go?! Just what kind of story is this?!

L: See? You're already dying of curiosity!

Au: Am not! It sounds awful. Besides, the reprint of volume 9 came out alongside this one, so we're already into the second arc.

L: Meh. You should've rewritten the entire thing along the lines of what I just suggested.

Au: No way! Anyway, this volume does indeed conclude the first major storyline. On a related note, I have some news. We mentioned before how the short story collections would now be called *Smash*, so to celebrate that, we're going to be putting out a best-of edition of the *Special* stories!

L: The current plan is for it to be five volumes. The content for the first two will be selected by the editor and the author, and the content of volumes four and five—and if possible, three as well—will be put to a reader vote! You can fill the author's room with postcards like you did during a certain popularity poll!

Au: Oh, please. I'll have the editorial department counting votes this time, for sure. You can send them in via postcard, website, or mobile! Of course, I have no idea right now when the voting will start... Just stay tuned to *Dragon Magazine*! They should have the list of stories you can vote on as well.

L: You might be thinking "I want to read stories about this character" or "I want to read that story," although you might not remember which story appeared where across thirty volumes! But make sure you vote anyway!

Au: By the way, this is all planned for 2008, so if you get this book later, tough break.

L: I wonder if we could have a vote for the best afterwords as well. Granted, the afterword collection would also have to have an afterword, leading to the hilarious and unusual circumstance of an after-afterword. But, oh well. Just so long as I get my screen time!

Au: Yeah, I don't think we're gonna do that.

L: By the way, shouldn't there be some kind of prize

giveaway for the voters? A year's supply of spiked hammers with the *Dragon Magazine* logo, perhaps?

Au: What? No! And what the heck is a year's supply of spiked hammers? Do they expire somehow? I should probably talk to editorial about prizes, though.

L: Anyway, await further updates from the magazine!

Au: With *Smash*, the *Special* collection, and the second arc starting in volume 9 all happening at the same time, I know it's a lot to handle, but we appreciate you coming along for the ride.

L: See you all next time!

Afterword: Over.

Slayers 8

KING OF THE PHANTOM CITY



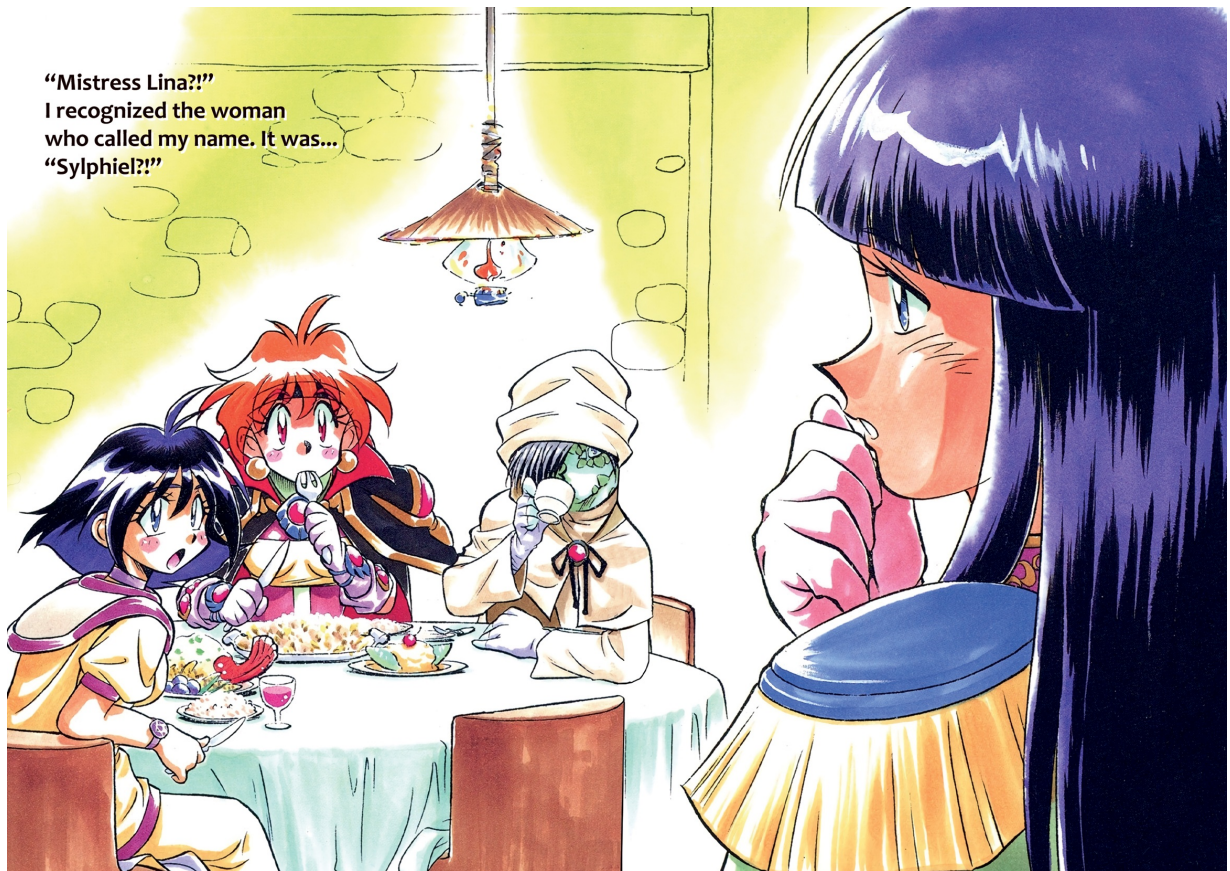
A porcelain hand reached out of Chaos Dragon Gaav's stomach as he screamed.



"Mistress Lina?!"

I recognized the woman
who called my name. It was...

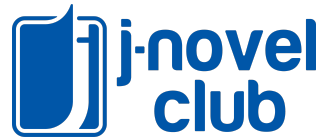
"Sylphiel?!"





A figure appeared
within the crystal.
“Sir Gourry!” Sylphiel
cried as she ran
up to him.





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Slayers: Volume 8
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SLAYERS Vol. 8
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Ebook edition 1.0: May 2021